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DOUBLE-ACTION WESTERN

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A DOUBLE-ACTION MAGAZINE

LOBO'S GUN-WHELP

NEW GOSPEL CUMMINGS NOVEL

by Chuck Martin

KILL FAST, RIDE HARD!

by Art Kercheval

FORTY-ROD JUSTICE

by C. William Harrison

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DOUBLE-ACTION WESTERN

Volume 18 November, 1950 Number 2

Feature "Gospel Cumming's" Novel

LOBO'S GUN-WHELP ..... Chuck Martin 8

Jeff Lawson is hell-bent to live up to the name tagged on him, "Lobo's Gun-Whelp", and only Gospel Cummings can prevent him from taking a trail from which there's no turning back. But how can a man of peace deal with kill-crazy passions on a trigger-proddy range?

Short Stories

FORTY-ROD JUSTICE ..... C. William Harrison 82

Limberlegs Ferguson figures he should have made out his will last night, when this fantastic assistant shows up...

KILL FAST, RIDE HARD! ..... Art Kercheval 87

Ralph Longan finds Mary at the end of his vengeance trail, and tries to forget that she married a lobo killer.

True Fact Article

IT'S A CALAMITY ..... Wayne D. Mote 86

Here's how a famous woman of the old West got her name.

Robert W. Lowndes, Editor

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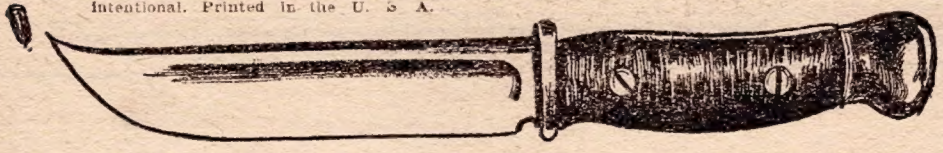

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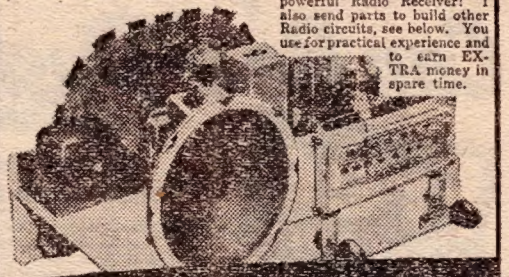

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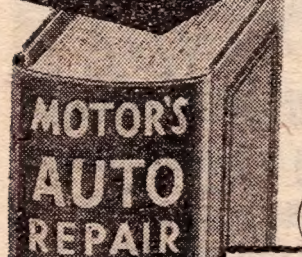

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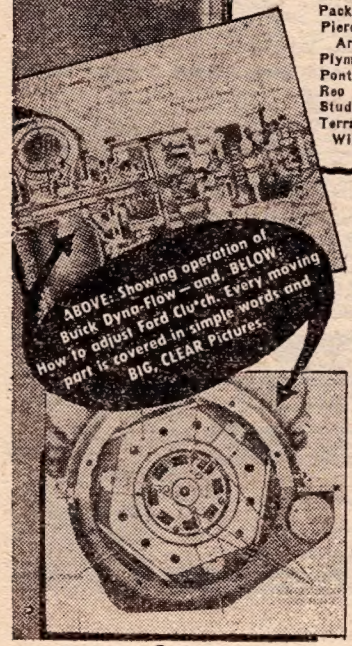
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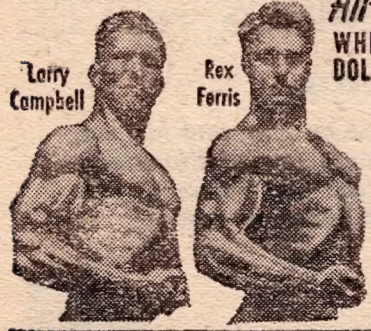

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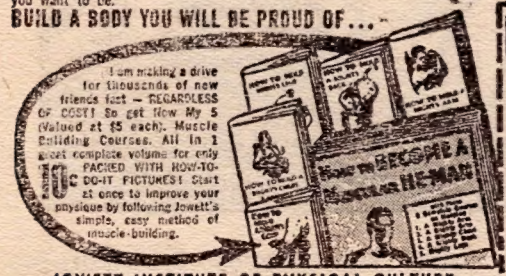

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Lobo's Gun-Whelp

FEATURE GOSPEL CUMMINGS NOVEL

by Chuck Martin

Old Jim Lawson dies with the lobo brand on him, and his son, Jeff is tagged the Lobo's Whelp. And only Gospel Cummings can keep young Jeff from fighting his head and becoming just what folks call him . . . if Jeff will listen to reason!

GOSPEL Cummings stopped reading and slowly raised his head. His nostrils flared slightly as his eyes half-closed for better concentration. Something was moving outside his cabin, which occupied a small island of land at the intersection of Three Points.

Jeff Dawson faced John Saint John in a crouch . . . then a gun-barrel thudded on the tall deputy's head, as Gospel Cummings took the situation in hand.

The gaunt plainsman listened intently, then spoke quietly. "Come out from cover and enter in peace, my friend!"

There was silence for a long moment, the natural silence of Hell's Half Acre. Some denizens of Vaca town referred to the burying ground

as Boothill, of which Gospel Cummings was the self-appointed caretaker. He earned a precarious livelihood by reading a simple service over the graves of those who had died with their boots on, but the wants of Gospel Cummings were few.

A boot scuffed on gravel, just outside the cabin door, and a tall, lean cowboy crouched forward with a cocked six-shooter in his grimy right fist. His narrowed blue eyes held the look of the hunted.

Cummings glanced at the shadow which spiked across his freshly-scrubbed, plank floor. Again he spoke, his deep voice friendly. "Howdy Jeff; holster your smoke-pole and fix yourself a bit of grub!"

"You know me?" a strained husky voice whispered.

Cummings nodded. "Seen you many's the time back on Lobo's Peak. I'm not at war with you or your Pa, like he might have told you. There's beef stew on the back of the stove."

"You're friends with that hulkin' law-dog, name of Saint John," the cowboy grated. "And there's a price on the Lobo's scalp like you damn well know!"

"I'm no bounty hunter, son," Cummings said with quiet dignity. "I am a simple man of peace—you might say a child of Nature."

Jeff Dawson sheathed his six-shooter and moved across the room. He took a bowl from the table, ladled stew from the simmering pot on the back of the stove, but all the while his eyes watched for any hostile move.

"Sit down and rest your hands and feet," Cummings suggested. "Why did the Lobo send you down to Three Points to make medicine with me?"

Once again Jeff Dawson palmed his six-shooter. "How'd you know that?"

"Read it in your face," Cummings answered slowly. "You wouldn't have come this close to town unless the need was urgent. How bad is your Pa hurt?"

"I got a mind to kill you, you old Sin-buster; like as not you was riding with that crowd of glory-hunters what bushed me over near Lost River!"

GOSPEL CUMMINGS did not smile. His glance touched the pages of an old Bible on the deal table before him; he shook his head. "I'm allowing you one mistake, yearling," he said bluntly. "Now you listen close while I make talk. I'm not a man of the cloth, and I'm not a part of the law. As for killing me: *Thou shalt not kill!* The Book says so."

"Sorry, Mister Cummings."

"Never call a cowboy *'Mister'* unless you don't like him, or unless he's not a cowboy," Cummings said dryly. "You was saying?"

"How'd you know the Lobo was hurt?" Jeff asked more quietly. "How'd you know he sent me down here to make medicine with you?"

"You're here, and bad news travels fast. I saw the Boyd boys ride past not long since; Tom Boyd said there would be a service to read over a new grave. Looks like he was wrong."

A spasm twisted his young face and Jeff Dawson stood up, an even six feet, wide through the shoulders, and not yet fully filled out.

"Them Boyds was right, Gospel," he said in a choked voice. "The Lobo ain't long for this world. He wants to talk to you before he crosses over to the big Green Pasters. You'll ride with an owl-hooter this one time?"

I'd ride with the Devil if I could do him any good," Gospel Cummings said grimly. "But you ain't no owl-hooter, Jeff."

"The burned-up old hell I ain't," Dawson said bitterly. "It was Terry Boyd who shot Dad on a sneak, and it was me who evened up for the Lobo!"

"That's bad, Jeff," Cummings said sadly. "They don't outlaw murder in this part of Arizona."

"Yeah, I know. And it's always open season on wolves!"

"Lobo means wolf," Cummings

said thoughtfully. "Looks like you're a chip off the old block. Wait here a minute and eat your grub while I saddle old Fred."

"Then you'll ride back with me?" Dawson asked eagerly. "To talk to the Lobo before he cashes in his chips?"

"I'll ride, but I never did believe that Jim Dawson held up Tom Boyd and stole that 3B payroll. I'll be with you in a matter of minutes."

JEFF DAWSON relaxed and began to eat the savory stew. He did not look around when a boot scuffed on the door-sill. Then he glanced idly at the shadow spiking across the worn floor. His right hand started for his worn holster, but a stern voice spoke sharply. "Leave the hardware ride, younker. The law speaking, and I've got you covered!"

"The lying old Holy Joe!" Dawson said bitterly. "He told me he was no part of the law!"

Jeff Dawson faced John Saint John in a crouch, and the big deputy sheriff reached for a pair of handcuffs at the back of his belt. A gun barrel thudded down heavily on the tall depty's head, and Saint John slumped to the floor with a little grunt.

Gospel Cummings caught the falling officer and spoke sharply at the staring cowboy. "Make a run for the Devil's Graveyard and get your hoss! Meet me up the trail where it branches to the badlands, and don't stand there staring like a fool Pilgrim!"

Jeff ran from the cabin and disappeared in the brush. Gospel Cummings sighed and reached into the right tail of his black broadcloth coat. His hand came out holding a quart bottle of Three Daisies whiskey; the gaunt plainsman drew the cork with his teeth, drank deeply.

"I hate the stuff," he said mournfully, and a brooding sorrow dwelt in his brown eyes. "But a man never knows when he might get bit by a snake," he added, and took a chaser of the same.

Reaching under his bunk, Cummings took a full quart of whiskey and placed it in the right tail of his coat, on the side where the bad man of his nature had its abode. That was also the side on which he carried his heavy forty-five Peacemaker Colt six-shooter.

He closed the Bible and dropped it in the left tail of his long coat, on the side where the good man of his nature lived. Now the trembling had left his strong brown hands. But Cummings was an experienced traveler; he took another drink for the road, placed the half-emptied bottle close to the right hand of the unconscious deputy, and left the cabin.

His hip-shot sorrel was standing at the tie-rail, and Cummings mounted expertly. His face was covered by a silky brown beard; his age could have been any where between forty and fifty. His closest friends said that Cummings had not changed in the fifteen years since he had ridden into Vaca from Texas, and Gospel Cummings seldom talked about his past.

He sent his horse up the trail at a brisk lope, shading his eyes with the drooping brim of his old black Stetson against the rays of a setting sun. Several times he shook his head sadly as he contemplated the part he had played in the little drama of life and death. He excused himself partially with a muttered explanation. "There's a man dying back there in the badlands. It's the least I can do for a wayward brother!"

HE RODE for an hour before leaving the broad trail that led on to Cole Brighton's Box B spread, and Ace Fleming's Circle F. To the west lay badlands and the Utah trail; Cummings studied the trail and nodded. He glanced at the trail-side brush and read sign, reined to a stop near a copse of lodge pines, and spoke quietly. "Ride out, Jeff; I'm traveling alone!"

Jeff Dawson rode out of the brush, holstering his six-shooter with a shamed grin. He was straddling a deep-chested Morgan horse; a dark bay with black points. "Sorry I mistrusted you that way,

oldtimer," he apologized. "I can't figure out why you even bothered."

"Mebbe I'm my brother's keeper... More than that, I'm a man with a dual personality. Every man is," Gospel added vehemently. "There's good and bad in every man!"

"You're in bad with the law now," Dawson said slowly. "You'll pard up with me?"

Cummings shook his head. "Do you go around shooting off your big mouth with your tongue a-wagging at both ends?"

Dawson flushed. "Unsay them words!" he commanded viciously. "Before I do you a meanness!"

Cummings moved his right hand and arm with deceptive speed. His worn six-shooter leaped to his hand before Dawson had completed his draw.

"You ain't tough," Gospel said grimly. "You ain't lived long enough to get rightly seasoned. Go on the prod with me and get to fighting your head, I'll trim your horns and cast them down in the bresh. You hear me, yearling?"

"Heard you, Gospel," Dawson murmured. "I was wrong to lose my head, and you're the fastest gun-swift I ever saw!"

"I'm no gun-swift!" Cummings contradicted. "I never killed a man in my life. Well, do you give up head and talk with your mouth wide open?"

"No, I don't," Dawson answered humbly. "But you assaulted the law with a deadly weapon!"

"Look cowboy," Cummings explained patiently. "In this land of the free, and long may she wave, a man is considered innocent until he is proven guilty; he don't have to convict himself. John Saint John don't know who cold-cocked him, and he never will know unless the only feller who saw it, goes around shooting off his mouth!"

"You should have been a lawsharp, Gospel," Dawson said. "I'll never tell if I have to go to hell in my bare feet!"

"Then he'll never know for sure," Cummings growled. "Saint John is a good man, and a square peace officer. He's an awful lot of man, like you know. The Saint weighs around two hundred-and-forty pounds, but that six-foot-six frame of his don't carry much fat. You keep out of the Saint's way from now on, until we clear old Jim's good name!"

Jeff Dawson smiled coldly in the fading twilight. "They've branded old Jim a rustler," he said bitterly. "And if you did clear his name, what good would that do a dead man?"

"Do him a lot of good," Cummings answered promptly. "A man lives through his get, and you're old Jim's only chip; if we clear his name, you can start in life as an honest man!"

"Not while those Boyds are alive... And mebbe they won't live too long!"

"Look, yearling," Cummings warned sharply. "I'm not riding with you to aid and abet an owl-hooter. I've always rode on the right side of the law, and I always will. But there's a greater law than that made by man!"

"I'm listening," Dawson said jerkily. "What's this other law?"

"The Law of Compensation," Cummings answered quietly. "You get paid for everything you do, and you pay for everything you get. Perhaps it takes a long time to work out, but it always works out!"

"I carry what law I need in my holster," Dawson said with a shrug. "Those Boyd hombres have branded me and the Lobo as owl-hooters, and now there will be a price on my scalp. I mean to look after myself!"

"Thou shalt not kill! Cummings warned sternly. *"He who lives by the sword, shall die by the sword!"*

"I'm just twenty," Jeff Dawson said quietly. "Billy the Kid was only twenty-one when he was killed, but he killed twenty-one men before he died!"

GOSPEL Cummings stopped his horse and faced the grim-faced young outlaw. Dawson stopped his Morgan automatically, his right hand hovering above the holstered pistol on his thigh.

Gospel Cummings sifted dust on the grave as he bade farewell to the mortal remains of old Jim Dawson. *"Vaya con Dios"*, he murmured.

"I've seen most things once, and some of them twice," Cummings said slowly. "Life don't owe me too much, but yours is all ahead of you. I dunno," he said slowly. "I'm sure I can beat you to the gun; if I do, it might save a lot of needless bloodshed!"

"Hell, a man can't die but one time!" Dawson retorted. "If that's the way you want it, turn loose your wolf!"

"Nuh uh," Cummings said quietly. "Most times I only shoot in self defense. Then I never kill the other feller. But I'm warning you, Jeff Dawson; you draw on me again, and you won't ever trigger another killer slug!"

Jeff Dawson laughed. *"Thou shalt not kill!"* he scoffed.

"I never kill."

Jeff widened his eyes. "You mean you'd cripple me for life?"

"So help me God!"

Dawson stared into the deep-set brown eyes, at the strong bearded face of this strange man with the dual personality. There was no fear in Dawson's mind, but gradually the anger drained from him, and left him what he was. A young, weary boy who had not yet attained his full growth. "I'll pass for now," he whispered. "The Lobo needs us both; we can settle this thing some other time!"

"Not so," Cumming said sternly. "We'll settle it now, Jeff; you can't ever escape from anything by running away from it. Well?"

"Damn you, you old Sin-buster!" Dawson burst out. "Fill your hand come out a-smoking!"

"Nuh uh," Cummings said, with a shake of his head. "After you, and I'll play what I catch on the draw. I'm waiting!"

Jeff Dawson crouched over in his saddle. Gospel Cummings sat tall and straight, with a deep seat. There was no emotion visible on his bearded face, but there was a slight tremble in his hands.

"I'm waiting," he repeated softly.

Dawson stared with his left hand clenched. Then he lowered his head and raised both hands shoulder high. "I know when I'm beat," he admitted in a half whisper. "You talk, and I'll listen to your wau-wau!"

Cummings nudged his horse a step closer and offered his right hand. "You've won a big victory, Jeff," he said earnestly. "I'm offering you the right hand of fellowship, and I'll help you all I can. All I want is for you to be guided some by my judgment. If that judgment gets you in trouble, I'll fight to help you out of it. You'll press the flesh, son?"

Jeff shot out his hand and gripped hard. Gospel Cummings vised down savagely to find expression for the emotions which now seethed through his veins like an angry pent-up flood. His anger gathered volume and strength when a sob broke from Dawson's tight throat.

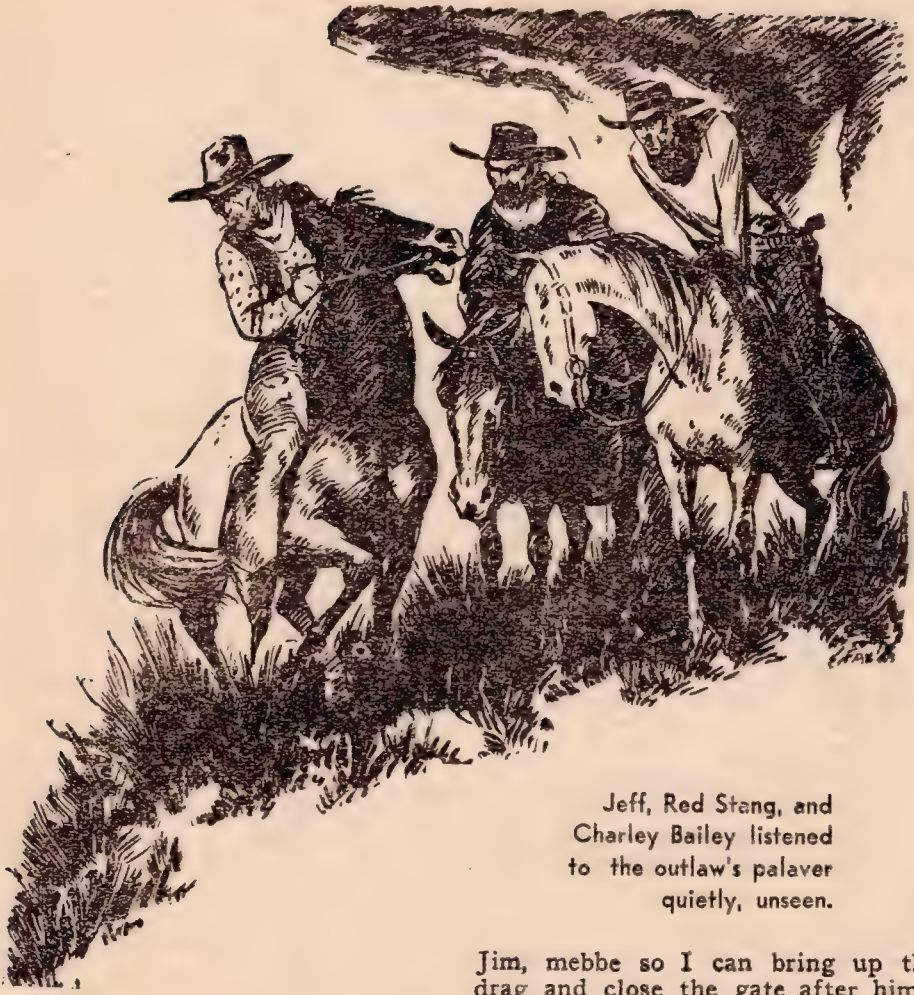
"I'll try, with your help, Gospel!" he promised in a husky voice.

"I want you to know, Jeff," Cummings said earnestly. "A man can't do his best fighting when he's wrong. That away, he always wants to make sure that he is right, the way he sees it. Now you get a brace on yourself while I walk my horse back here in the bresh away to take a look at my saddle. Don't follow me!"

HE WHIRLED old Fred and rode deep into the sage and creosote bush. He dismounted stiffly with his back to the horse's head. His right hand darted into the cavernous pocket of his coat; came out clutching the full quart of Three Daisies.

Strong teeth drew the cork, and the bottle shook violently in the gaunt plainsman's right hand. He made a mark with his thumb, raised the bottle swiftly, and drank...past the mark.

For a long moment Gospel Cummings stood perfectly still, allowing the uncut whiskey to course through his blood stream. He coughed apologetically, cleared his throat. "About the time of year a man gets a bad cough," he murmured. "Wine is a mocker, and I never did care much for wine!"



Jeff, Red Stang, and Charley Bailey listened to the outlaw's palaver quietly, unseen.

He drank deeply, stoppered the bottle, and returned it to his hiding place. Now his brown hands were steady, but a brooding look of sorrow lurked deep in his eyes when he mounted his horse and rode back to join the cowboy who waited in the murky gloom.

"You get that saddle fixed?" Dawson asked quietly.

"I got it f i x e d," Cummings answered with quiet dignity. "Whereabouts did you leave old Jim?"

"In a cave close to Lost River. I'll warn you now, Gospel. Don't go trying to break a trail into Buleau land for the Lobo. It won't do you a mite of good; he ain't a damn bit repentant, and you won't need the Scriptures!"

"If I can't bend the lead for old Jim, mebbe so I can bring up the drag and close the gate after him," Cummings answered in trail-talk. "How bad is he hurt?"

"T o o bad," Dawson answered bluntly. "He taken a 45 slug high in the left breast, just above the heart. I packed him back into the cave, plugged the hole the best I could, and made him easy. He wanted to see you, so I set out to fetch you!"

"So time's a-wasting," Cummings growled. "Hit a high lope and let's get long gone!"

Jeff Dawson knew that Gospel Cummings was familiar with every trail and hide-out in the lava badlands. Without more talk, the young cowboy touched his Morgan with the spurs and went racing away through the brush. Old Fred kept right on the Morgan's heels, and both horses were lathered when

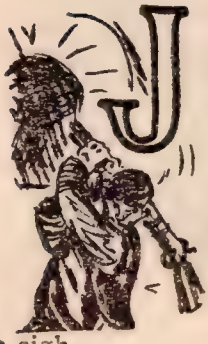
Dawson rode up a narrow brush-choked trail and into a large cave.

"Light down and go to him," Dawson whispered brokenly. "I'll take care of the horses. And Gospel?"

"Yeah, Jeff?"

"Give the old outlaw a snort of snake-bite. He was bit by a damn rattler; the kind that don't give any warning!"

2



JIM Dawson was waiting, with his back against his bedroll, his sunken eyes closed. He opened them slowly as a heavy rifle came up in his thin brown hands. Then Jim smiled and lowered the rifle with a sigh.

"Howdy, Gospel," he said weakly. "Knew you'd come, old friend!"

Gospel Cummings sat down on a blanket and took the wounded man's right hand. He did not speak for a time; his eyes were studying the scars of the owl-hoot years on the face of his old friend.

"You ain't but forty-two, Jim," Cummings whispered. "I recall when you were a lot like young Jeff. You came to make a hand on the old XIT spread down there in Texas!"

"That was a thousand years ago," Dawson said with a wan smile.

Cummings reached for the bottle in the right tail of his long coat. "Jim says you was bit by a sidewinder. Take you a good snort of this snake-bite to sotter keep up your strength. You wanted to talk, remember?"

He pulled the cork with his teeth and held the bottle to Jim Dawson's pallid lips. The wounded outlaw drank deeply, and sighed. "Cowboy can't stand on one leg; how's another of the same for balance?"

"Drink hearty, pard," Cummings answered, and tipped the bottle again.

Jim Dawson drank a deep draft. Cummings stuck a forefinger in the neck of the bottle, cleaned it with a plop, and raised it to his bearded lips. "To the confusion of our enemies, Jim; I'll side your chip as far as I can. You was saying?"

"It won't be long now, Gospel; I never lifted that 3B payroll like them Boyds allowed. On top of that, I never rustled any of their beef, except for camp meat. And that ain't all. Terry Boyd shot me on a sneak, without giving me a chance!"

"That's good enough for me, Jim," Cummings answered. "Why didn't you come in and stand trial?"

Jim Dawson laughed shortly. "I didn't have a chance," he said slowly. "I'd have got ten years shut away from the sun, so I just stayed back in the badlands and lived free while I could!"

"Three long years," Cummings murmured. "The Saint never tried to find you."

A FROWN crossed his bearded face as Cummings thought of Saint John. He shrugged irritably, tightened his lips, and waited for Dawson to speak.

"I had two sections of land back there by the 3B," Dawson began slowly. "It's gone now on account of the taxes."

"Wrong," Cummings contradicted; "your friends paid the taxes every year."

"Ace Fleming," Dawson said thoughtfully. "Ace is a square gambler, but he took my little Triangle D herd. I was just getting a good start!"

"Ace took the herd," Cummings admitted. "He sold off the steers, and kept the young stuff in your brand. Ace figured young Jeff would need a start one of these days, and the cattle and money are waiting whenever Jeff makes up his mind to come out of the bresh, after he get's his growth!"

"You mean Fleming did that for me?" Dawson whispered.

"There's four thousand in cash for

Jim when he's twenty-one," Cummings answered. "And a nice foundation herd of better than three hundred critters." His face clouded again. "Can you tell me why the Boyds want that two sections of yours so bad?"

"How long have the Boyds been in Arizona?"

"Matter of about four years."

"You ever hear of the James Boys?" Dawson asked with a grim smile.

"Who hasn't?"

"There was a yarn about the James Boys hiding about a hundred thousand in loot," Dawson answered. "Course it's stolen money, but there was also said to be a pile of diamonds and jewelry."

"You never ran with the James Boys. What's all this palaver got to do with that and the Boyds?"

"That loot is some place on the Triangle D," Dawson said quietly. "The Boyds knew it, though I can't tell you how they found out."

"You mean all that money was there all the time, and you never used some of it to help you get a start?"

"It was all stolen money," Dawson said with quiet dignity. "I was an honest man up to the time them Boyds put me on the owl-hoot trail!"

"And you found it?"

"I never found it," Dawson admitted. "One night about three years ago, an old buscadero rode into the Triangle D on a spavined horse. This old Jasper was wounded about the way I'm shot up now. He said three brothers had tried to make him talk; had shot him when he made a fast getaway one night."

"What for kind of hoss was this old He straddling?"

JIM DAWSON took a long pull at the bottle before answering. "It was a 3B hoss. He didn't last long, this old saddle-bum; said he was one of the James gang."

"Yeah, I know," Cummings said with a nod. "He died that night, and I read a prayer over his grave back there in the Devil's Graveyard."

"That money is some place on the Triangle D; there's an old cave between two small hills where a spring used to be. The bandits buried the loot and set off some dynamite to make a slide over the face of the cave. They were all killed or captured except old Fred Haney, which wasn't this jasper's right name."

"So all you had to do was find the old cave."

"I hunted for six months, and then I was framed for that 3B holdup," Dawson said bluntly. "I never did find the place, but Jim is still young. Keep him straight, Gospel, and help him get a start!"

"Here's my hand on it, Jim," Cummings promised. "Fifteen hundred acres ain't much of a cattle-spread, but it's a heap of land for to go looking for a needle in a haystack!"

"I've got no proof, but add it all up," Dawson whispered, his voice weaker. "Old Haney said three brothers had tried to make him talk, and they shot him. He was straddling a 3B hoss, and the Boyds wanted my little outfit. They framed me, and now they've done for me."

Gospel Cumings turned his back and bent his elbow. He drank deeply and nodded his assent, laid the bottle aside when a hollow rattle broke the stillness.

"Jim!" he called sharply. "I'll get you a doctor, old pard!"

Gospel Cummings stared at the pale bearded face for a long moment. He reached out a hand and gently closed the dead man's staring sightless eyes. Running boots warned him, and Cummings turned just as Jeff Dawson ran to his father.

"How is he, Gospel?" the cowboy whispered. "You think he'll make it?"

Gospel Cummings nodded. "He's already made it, Jeff," he said gentle. "Old Jim has took the long trail into that far-away land from whose bourne no traveler ever returns!...I'll leave you with him for a time."

* * *

JEFF DAWSON had tied the horses to a pillar of limestone,

and thrown prairie hay at their feet. He had removed saddles and bridles, rubbed the sweat from the lathered hides of the animals.

Cummings turned slowly when dragging spurs chimed on the rocky floor of the cave. Jeff Dawson had *two* gunbelts strapped around his lean hips. His young face was a mask of savage determination. "I'm getting about my snake-hunting, Gospel. Them Boyds killed old Jim, and he was the onliest kin I had. My Ma died when I was nine, and I aim to square up for the old man!"

"You figure you can do it better with two six-shooters?"

"There's two of them Boyds left," Jeff answered thickly. "I aim to get 'em both!"

"Let's set a spell," Cummings suggested. "You can't go chousing off on your snake-killing, not until old Jim is put away proper—can you, cowboy?"

Jeff Dawson clenched his hands and ground a high boot-heel into the rocky floor. "Damn you, Gospel!" he raged. "You know damn well I can't ride out and leave old Jim a-layin' there!"

"So we'll sit and make medicine," Cummings answered. "We'll take Jim back to town and have Boothill Crandall fix Jim up nice. I'll read the service, and you stay right with me until it is all over!"

"Can't do it, Gospel," Jeff Dawson said fiercely. "That law-dog would pick me up sure, and those Boyds would sign the complaint!"

"You didn't kill a man."

"What did you say?"

"I said you never killed Terry Boyd," Cummings repeated. "Your slug creased his scalp and knocked him down. Matter of fact, Tom and Dixon Boyd don't know who took that long shot at their brother, Terry."

Jeff Dawson seized Cummings by the right hand. "Are you just saying that to get me to the burying?"

Gospel shook his head. "Nuh uh, I was talking to Terry Boyd himself. As for Saint John, he was exceeding his authority when he threw down on you; he didn't have any warrant, and there's no complaint against you. When old Jim took out on the long trail, he really gave you your freedom!"

Jeff Dawson sucked in a long breath. "I can ride and talk with honest men again," he murmured, and then his face hardened. "So the first thing I'll do after the service, is skotch me three snakes. I won't miss next time!"

"You've got a lot to live for," Cummings said carelessly. "A nice little cattle spread, about three hundred head of cattle, and money in the bank. All you've got to do is behave like a man until you are twenty-one years old. That's about four months more. You going to throw it all away?"

"Yeah!" Dawson snarled. "I'm gonna throw it all away to square up for my Dad. Them Boyds ain't fitten to live, and I mean to see that they don't!"

"Let's see," Cummings said musingly. "If Saint John knowed that it was you who creased Terry Boyd, he could take you in for assault with a deadly weapon!"

"That's right," Dawson agreed with

a grim smile. "And if that big deputy knowed it was you who hit him with the barrel of a hog-leg, he could gather you into the fold for the same reason!"

"Hmmm, you've got a point there," Cummings admitted. "And nohow, neither one of us is the kind of an hombre to give up head about a pard."

"So I'll get on with my snake-killing after the service," Jeff Dawson announced firmly.

"I made old Jim, your Pa, a promise just before he breathed his last," Cummings said slowly. "Said I'd look after his chip, and try to make him an upright and honest man. I aim to keep that promise if I have to kill old Jim's chip to do it!"

JEFF DAWSON made a derisive sound with his pursed lips. "Hog-wash," he sneered. "*Thou shalt not kill.* Remember?"

Gospel Cummings sighed and shook his wide shoulders. "Look, Jeff," he pleaded. "That's twice within ten minutes that you've outsmarted me. Now why in tarnation don't you use your mind to beat them Boyd brothers, and square up legal for old Jim at the same time?"

"Name me one reason why I should."

"Keep your hands away from your hardware, son," Cummings warned. "I'm going to name one reason, and if you make a pass, I'll wrap a gun-frame around your skull!"

"I'm all ears."

"So's a jackass," Cummings said tartly. "That one reason is Connie Brighton!"

Jeff Dawson stiffened, then he grinned slowly and offered his right hand. "You're the best, you damned old sin-buster, and no offense," he said slowly.

They stood looking at each other with a new respect, then Jeff slowly removed his battered old gray Stetson.

"Jim Dawson was as honest as the day is long; "he never did that stick-up on the 3B payroll!"

"That was all part of the scheme," Cummings agreed. "Jim had it pretty well figured out, but he didn't live long enough to prove it. Now say you go getting yourself killed; there won't be any point in trying to clear old Jim's good name. Will there?"

"No point," Jeff admitted. "Why did the Boyds want our little old run-down Triangle D spread?"

"Because there's a heap of treasure buried there some where," Cummings answered without hesitation. "Some old *banditto* said he had belonged to the James gang, and they buried the treasure in a cave on the Triangle D!"

"I remember that old mossyhorn," Dawson said slowly. "Come to think of it, he was shot up the same way as Jim was."

Gospel Cummings narrowed his brown eyes as he stroked his silky beard. He nodded as though he had made a discovery of importance. "Whoever shot old Fred Haney made one little mistake; he can't call his shots so good, and he pulls a mite high off center!"

Jeff leaned forward, his nostrils dilated. "I know who shot Jim," he said hoarsely. "It was Terry Boyd. He's got a cast in his left eye!"

"The law will take care of Terry Boyd in time," Cummings said soothingly. "You don't want to go doing anything to put yourself a-straddle of the owl-hoot again. Your Dad was only forty-two, and you see what it did to him in five years."

"Look, Gospel," Jeff Dawson said earnestly. "I'm going to give both those kinds of law you spoke about, a fair chance. If neither one of them works, I'll use my own kind of law. You made Jim a promise; now I'm making you one!"

"Fair enough, pard," Cummings said; "you and me are going to take old Jim into Vaca town," Cummings announced. "There might be those who will have things to say. Pay them no mind, Jeff. They might just be playing into our hands!"

"It's going to be a chore, if Terry Boyd gives me any slack-jaw," Jeff muttered. "But I'll give 'er a try, Gospel."

3

VACA TOWN was just stirring to life when three horses came into town from the west, walking slowly up the wide dusty street. Gospel Cummings rode to the left, with Jeff Dawson on the right; Dawson's steeldust was wedged in the middle with the body of his master roped to the old saddle.

The two men had stopped at Three Points, and Gospel Cummings had cooked a hearty meal. A tall man dressed in funeral black stared at the three horses, and walked out to the rack in front of his store.

This was Boot Hill Crandall, the local undertaker. Crandall ran a furniture store out in front; the rear of the long, adobe building housed his funeral parlors. He spoke in a rich, mournful voice as the riders came abreast. "Light down and rest your saddles, gents. Bring the late departed around the back way, that he may rest after his long ride!"

Gospel Cummings appeared annoyed, but Crandall was the only undertaker in Vaca. Jeff Dawson glared at Crandall, but he followed Cummings' example and dismounted.

"I will notify the Coroner and the law," Crandall said with a slow smile. "A part of my regular service, at no extra cost."

"I can pay the cost," Jeff said icily. "I want the best coffin in the place, and Gospel will attend to the graveside services."

"That will be ten dollars more."

"There will be no fee," Cummings said gently. "Jim Dawson was my friend, and an old saddle-mate."

"This way, gentlemen," Crandall said, as Cummings threw off the ties that held the body to Jim Dawson's faithful horse. "You brought a suit of his dress clothes?"

"Same shall be procured," Cummings answered shortly. "Jim and I will buy them ourselves."

Crandall preceded the two men and opened the back door. They carried the body of Jim Dawson into the preparation room, and Jeff hurried back to the horses. Cummings faced Crandall with a grim look on his bearded face. "That gray casket, and how much?"

"I will present a detailed bill to Jeff Dawson," Crandall hedged.

Gospel Cummings spoke sternly. "The price is two hundred, and not a cent more," he said bluntly.

"Three hundred and twenty," Crandall argued.

"Look," Cummings answered. "They shot men like Billy the Kid, and Jesse James. At least those two carried pistols when they held up a man!"

"I'll run my own business; you run yours," Crandall retorted.

"You run yours properly, or I'll ruin it; if I spread the word around town about what you are trying to do, some of the boys might drag you on the end of a rope, and it fastened to a running horse. Well?"

"Two hundred, cash at the graveside," Crandall muttered. "What you do is your own business, but I'm not in this business for my health."

CUMMINGS nodded and went out to join Jeff, who was sitting his saddle impatiently. Cummings climbed his horse just as John Saint John came down the street at a fast walk. The big deputy had one big hand on his belt-gun, but he loosened his grip when he saw Gospel Cummings.

"You're under arrest, Dawson!"

"Just back up and start all over, Saint," Cummings said curtly. "What's the charge again Jeff?"

"Rustling, attempted murder, and resisting arrest," Saint John blustered.

"One at a time," Cummings suggested, and he nodded when a dapper little man walked slowly forward to listen. "Howdy, Ace," he said to the little man. "I'd take it kindly if

you'd listen in. You was saying, Saint?"

"The Boyd brothers claim this yearling is rustling 3B beef."

"Did they sign a complaint? Have they any proof?"

"Skip that for now," the deputy hedged; "Terry Boyd said he is almost sure the kid shot him."

"You said he was almost?"

"It wasn't Boyd," Saint John growled; "he'd have killed you just like he did for your Pa!"

Jeff Dawson clasped both hands on the horn of his saddle. The knuckles showed white, but Gospel Cummings interrupted before Dawson could answer. "You're a disgrace to the badge you're wearing today, Saint. Jim Dawson was Jeff's

"That's what Terry allowed."

"Tell Boyd he will have to be sure," Ace Fleming interrupted. "Now what's all this talk about Jeff resisting arrest?"

"I caught up with him down at Three Points," Saint John explained wrathfully. "I had him under my gun, when some pard of his snuck up behind and buffaloed me over the skull with the barrel of his gun!"

"You saw this attacker?" Fleming asked.

Saint John rubbed his head. "I saw stars, is all," he admitted; "when I roused around, the prisoner was gone!"

"Lucky for you he was," the gambler said dryly. "You had no warrant for him, and he could have sued you and the County for false arrest!"

"Just a minute!" the deputy bellowed, and he turned to Dawson. "You saw this jigger who hit me; I demand to know his name!"

"It could have been Terry Boyd," Jeff answered.

only kin, and we just brought the body in. If you was any kind of a peace officer, you'd arrest Terry Boyd for murder!"

"Jim Dawson was wanted, and there was a price on his scalp," the deputy retorted. "Boyd will get that thousand dollars, and like you know, it's always open season on lobos!"

"Big feller," Jeff Dawson said quietly, "some day I'm going to make you eat your words. Jim Dawson was an honest man, which is more than I can say for those who framed him!"

No one interrupted. Saint John cleared his throat, and appeared embarrassed. "I'm the law here. Are you threatening the law?"

"Nuh uh, just making a promise."

"You want to make something of that?" Gospel asked angrily.

"What's it to you?"

"Jim Dawson and me rode the range together down in Texas," Cummings answered, his tone brittle. "Jim was honest in everything

he ever did. He was my saddle-pard, and I'm siding his chip. You can pass that word to the Boyds if you're so minded. Come on, Jim: we've got some shopping to do!"

Ace Fleming owned the *Casino*, though he seldom ran the games since he had married Sandra Carson. Fleming also owned the prosperous Circle F cattle spread. He stood about five-feet-five in his polished boots, but Fleming was one of the strongest men in Vaca. "I've known you for a long time, Saint," he told the deputy. "Are you rodding the law here, or are you taking sides with the Boyd crowd?"

"I'm rodding the law!"

"Then you rod it legal," Fleming suggested and he walked back to the Casino.

GOSPEL CUMMINGS and Jeff Dawson went to the General Store and bought a complete outfit of clothing for the dead man. A tall, old cattleman waited at the tie-rail in front of the store. He stepped up and offered his right hand to Dawson.

"Glad to see you again, Jeff," he said heartily. "You need any help that Gospel can't give you, call on Cole Brighton!"

Jeff Dawson swallowed hard and nodded. "Thanks, Cole," he murmured huskily. "I just might need some help before I get all straightened out."

He glanced up the street and suddenly stiffened. Cummings followed the cowboy's glance, and loosened the heavy six-shooter on his right leg. "Steady, boy, that's Tom and Dixon Boyd, but they won't get far if they make trouble!"

The Boyd brothers rode up to the store and dismounted from their 3B horses. Tom was the oldest; a man of perhaps forty. He was tall, lathy thin, and his pale blue eyes were cold and slitted as he stared at Dawson.

Dixon was five years younger than his brother, but cut on the same general pattern. Both had the lazy grace of the born saddle athlete, but Jeff knew that the laziness was deceptive.

Tom Boyd stepped away from his brother, who also took a step to the right. Dixon Boyd spoke to Gospel from the side of his mouth, and his eyes never left the face of young Dawson. "This is between us and that outlaw's cub, Cummings. We're taking him for the law, or killing him."

"Hold it so!" Cummings warned sternly. "The law has already talked to Jeff. There's no charge again him; no warrant out for his arrest!"

"I'll take Dixon, Gospel," Jeff said eagerly. "You watch that other side-winder. They brought it to me!"

"You want it that away?" Cummings asked Tom Boyd.

"It ain't none of your put in," Tom hedged.

"I've bought chips in this game," Gospel Cummings announced. "And that ain't all; Ace Fleming has a stack to play in any game you deal!"

"I'll put in my ante," old Cole Brighton added.

"Think it over, boys," Cummings suggested. "You three fellers can't just ride down and shoot a yearling to make you a reputation. Still painted for war?"

"Mebbe this ain't the time or place," Tom Boyd said slowly. "It's a good thing this lobo's whelp came in out of the tangles."

"That's right," Cummings agreed. "Back there a feller can sneak up and shoot a man before he knows he's in danger. If that same thing happens in town, the law will call it murder!"

JOHN SAINT JOHN walked up and listened intently. He plucked at his long cowhorn moustaches, and Tom Boyd turned to the deputy. "Is Gospel telling it straight? He says this Dawson maverick ain't wanted any more!"

"He's telling it straight," Saint John answered curtly. "And after this, I'll thank you 3 B hombres to let the law do the work it gets paid to do. You hear me?"

"Rustling is anybody's business," Dixon said nastily. "If we catch a rustler on our range, we won't need any help from the law!"

"That works two ways," Jeff spoke up quietly. "If I catch any killers or thieves on the Triangle D, I won't likewise need any help from the law!"

Tom Boyd appeared startled. "Meaning you are going back to the run-down Triangle D?"

"He owns every foot of it," Gospel interrupted. "Ace Fleming paid the taxes, and kept Jeff's foundation herd under the Triangle D iron. Jeff is a friend of mine, like old Jim was before him; I wouldn't want to hear about anything funny happening to Jeff!"

"I'll give you five dollars an acre for those two sections," Tom Boyd told Dawson. "It ain't worth more than two."

"Better buy some other land for two," Jeff said coldly. "The Triangle D ain't for sale."

Dixon looked over Jeff's saddle with impudent inquiry. "Glad to see you don't pack a running iron."

"Don't judge other people by yourself!" Dawson said hotly. "A dog that will fetch a bone, will carry one!"

"You accusing me of rustling?"

"Right back at you, cow feller," Dawson countered; "are you accusing me of the same?"

"Pass it for now," Boyd murmured. "But if I catch you...?"

"So I'll keep an eye on you too," Dawson promised; "I aim to run my Triangle D critters on my own land."

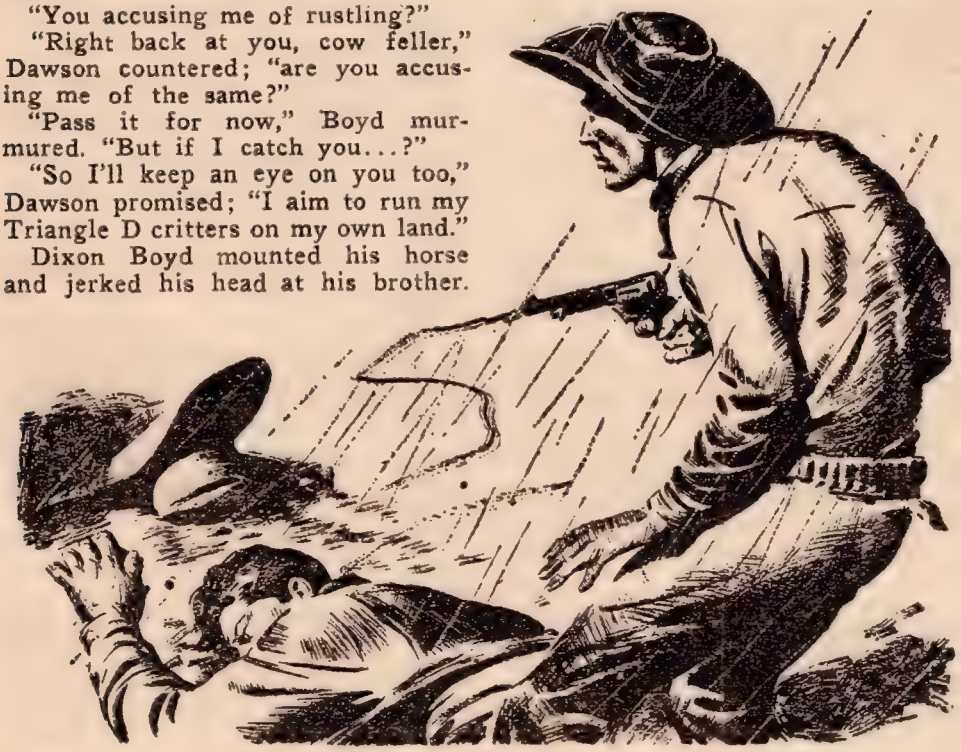
Dixon Boyd mounted his horse and jerked his head at his brother. Jeff Dawson stood wide-legged, staring at them as long as they were in sight. Gospel Cummings spoke quietly.

"Better stay with me for a few days, Jeff. Then I'll ride out to the Triangle D with you, and help you get started again. Now I got a few little things to do; I'll meet you here in an hour."

CUMMINGS mounted his sorrel and rode up the street. He turned at the corner, rode to an alley, and turned in. A moment later he knocked at the back door of the *Casino*.

The bartender came to the door, a fat man with a lock of greasy black hair curled over his left eye. He glared at Cummings who stared without speaking. "Step in and have one on the house, Gospel."

"You're a comical cuss, Fat Farrel," Cummings said dryly. "I never drink on the premises like you know. Wrap me up four quarts of Three Daisies in a fairly recent newspaper."



Fat Farrel stepped closer and spoke in a whisper. "Tom Dixon was talking some, Gospel," he growled. "He allowed that as soon as his brother Terry got over his headache, he'd be looking for young Jeff Dawson. Thought you ought to know, seeing that you are riding herd on that yearling for a spell."

"Thanks, bardog; fore-warned is fore-armed. Can I buy you a drink of that foul stuff you sell?"

"Save your money, Gospel," Farrel said with a grin. "It might be a long hard winter, but your face is good with me and the boss."

He disappeared and returned a moment later with the bottles wrapped in a newspaper. Cummings took the package, mounted his horse, waved a friendly hand at Farrel, and rode down the alley. Cummings reined his horse to a stop when he saw Jeff Dawson facing two cowboys in front of the long saloon.

Both were youngsters, not much older than Jeff Dawson. One was a tall lean waddy with a shock of red hair; his partner was shorter, with wide, powerful shoulders, and they had Jeff Dawson between them. The redhead was speaking. "Better fork your bronc and quit the country you damn owl-hooter. We catch you in town after twelve o'clock, we aim to make you hard to find!"

Cummings nudged his horse with a blunted spur and loped up the street. He swung down near the stocky cowboy, glanced at the two horses tied to the rail, and waited. Both horses were branded with the 3 B on the left flank.

Jeff faced the tall redhead defiantly. "Make me hard to find right now."

Without warning, Dawson stepped forward like a cat, jabbed the tall redhead with a stiff left, and crossed his right fist to the jaw. As his pard went down, the blocky 3 B puncher leaped at Dawson.

Gospel Cummings stepped forward and swung his flat hand hard against Shorty's head. "Stay out of it, Shorty; you ain't running in a wolf-pack now!"

Red Stang rolled up and rushed at Dawson. Jeff avoided the savage charge, and clipped Stang behind the ear as the lanky cowboy rushed past. Then Dawson followed him, pouring hard rights and lefts to the bony face of his taller opponent.

Red stood up under the punishment, trying to catch a hold with his long, powerful arms. Gospel Cummings leaned against the tie-rail to watch, a little smile curling his bearded lips.

Jeff allowed a long arm to slide over his shoulder; as Red tightened that arm, Dawson turned swiftly, caught the thick wrist, and bucked down as he pulled at the same time.

Red Stang flew through the air and landed hard on his back and shoulders. Dawson was after him fast; as Stang came to his feet, Jeff drove in with all his weight behind a straight right which caught Red flush on the point of his bony jaw.

Stang stiffened; his boots left the ground, then the lanky redhead fell face-forward in the trampled dust. Jeff turned to Shorty Benson. "I never did get enough fight," he said crisply. "You're next, you barn-shouldered coyote!"

Shorty made a savage rush and sat down hard when a rocky fist exploded under his jaw. He shook his head, but refused to get to his feet. "I don't fight much with my hands," he said coldly. "You want to make it with smoke-poles?"

"Suits me; get on your hind legs and make a pass!"

John Saint John stepped out of his office and shouted. His law-gun was in his right hand. "You, Shorty Benson. You and Red Stang climb your saddles and get on out of town. I saw this whole go-around. Don't stop for a drink or I'll wrap the jail around you both!"

The 3 B cowboys mounted their horses and rode toward the east. Red had had enough fight, but Shorty Benson growled threats as he passed Gospel Cummings. "I'll square for that belt you hung on me, old-timer. I'll catch you when you don't have the law to back up your tin-horn play!"

Gospel made no answer; he mounted his horse, thanked Saint John with a nod of his head and waited for Dawson to mount his Morgan. "Let's get out to Three Points," he suggested. "We didn't get any sleep last night."

4

SEVERAL huge pots of water were boiling on the stove in Gospel Cummings' cabin. A large wooden tub stood near the stove, and after filling it, the gaunt plainsman stripped down and stepped into his bath. "*Cleanliness is next to Godliness.* I can at least be clean!"

It was just after the noon meal. Jeff Dawson was out in the graveyard, watching the Mexican gravediggers work. The funeral of Jim Dawson would take place at two o'clock.

Gospel Cummings dried himself on a rough huck towel, tied it around his middle and reached under his bunk. He raised a bottle of Three Daisies to his bearded lips, and drank heartily.

Every man in Vaca knew that Gospel Cummings was never without his cough medicine, yet no man in Vaca town ever had seen Cummings under the influence of strong drink; he carried liquor like a gentleman.

He placed the bottle within easy reach, clothed himself in his one good broadcloth suit, tied a black string tie under the collar of his white linen shirt, and sat down to read the Book.

For an hour he sat without moving, except to turn the dogeared pages of his old Bible.

The sound of voices penetrated to his consciousness, and Cummings arose quickly and shrugged into his long-tailed black coat. Gospel tucked the Bible down in his left tail pocket, put a new black Stetson on his black head. He left the cabin, walked slowly to meet a glass hearse which was drawn by four horses, two white and two black.

Boot Hill Crandall was in the driver's seat, tooling his four-horse hitch expertly through the narrow portals of Hell's Half Acre. Cummings took his place behind the glass hearse, nodding as Jeff Dawson fell in beside him.

Most of the residents of Vaca were on horse-back, or in wagons and buggies. The solemn procession proceeded into the burying ground, winding between the volcanic rocks which served as headstones. For one dollar a letter, Boot Hill Crandall earned side money by chiseling the name of the deceased, and the date of death.

Crandall made a wide circle and stopped his teams with a flourish. The back end of the hearse now faced the open grave, and six old cattlemen took their places as Crandall opened the door.

They carried the coffin to the grave where it was placed on stakes set across the open grave. Gospel Cummings took his place at the head of the grave; Jeff Dawson faced him from the foot.

Gospel Cummings glanced at a little group of men some distance away. He spoke gently. "All gentlemen will please remove their headgear out of respect for the deceased!"

None of the men made a move to uncover their heads; they all stood close to horses wearing the 3 B brand. The Boyd brothers stood together, with Terry in the middle. He was younger than the other two, and would have been handsome except for a cast in his left eye. All carried six-shooters in their holsters.

"I shall speak but once more!" Cummings said firmly. "All gentlemen will please remove their hats!"

A DEEP, brooding silence fell across the place of the dead. None of the 3 B crowd made any move to obey the suggestion.

Gospel Cummings held his worn Bible in his left hand. His right whipped down and up with orange

flame outlining the black muzzle of his six-shooter. The new gray stetson leaped from the head of Terry Boyd like a thing alive.

As if motivated by the same common impulse, every man in the 3 B crew quickly doffed his head-gear. Terry snarled, "I didn't have any respect for the deceased!"

"Silence!" Cummings roared. "Another word from you, and I will do more than just part your hair with a slug!"

Jeff Dawson tightened his fists and his lips at the same time. He was watching Terry, the man who had killed his father without warning.

Gospel Cummings holstered his smoking pistol and composed his features. He read from the Book, his deep voice rich and musical, then closed it and glanced around at the faces of the mourners. "Jim Dawson was my friend, and an honest man," Cummings began. "His life was an open book for all to read. He was a good husband, a devoted father, and a tophand cowboy. He was forced into flight by circumstances beyond his control, but now he has found peace and rest at last. His son has come back to us, a clean and honest man. Jim Dawson was wrongfully accused, but I want to say that the Truth, though crushed to earth, shall rise again. Murder will out, and the killer lives with his conscience!"

He stopped to glance at Terry Boyd, but the youngest of the brothers merely glared at the tall man of peace. Gospel Cummings continued. "I knew Jim Dawson when he was no older than his son Jeff. He was a cowboy down in Texas on the old XIT spread. He had the respect of every *honest* man in Texas, just as he had here in Arizona. I was proud to call him friend!"

He leaned over and picked up a clod of earth. Breaking it between his strong, brown fingers, Gospel Cummings said, *"Vaya con Dios, Amigo!"*

* * *

CUMMINGS walked slowly from the grave, made his way between the volcanic headstones, and entered his cabin. He placed the Bible on the table, reached for the bottle.

He heard the glass hearse rattle through the portals of the graveyard, and roll back to town. Then the thud of many hooves, and after a time, the sound of young voices near the tie-rail at one side of the cabin.

A smile lighted up the bearded features as Cummings glanced out and saw Jeff Dawson talking to a pretty girl, the two conscious only of each other.

"I've missed you something wonderful, Connie," Jeff said, his voice strained. "Three years is a long time."

Connie Brighton smiled and nodded her head. Like old Cole Brighton, her father, she was cow-folks, and proud of her heritage. "I missed you too, Jeff," she whispered. "You'll come to see me sometimes?"

"You mean... I can?"

"Come often," Connie urged. "We can go to the dances, and riding."

"I'll come; I like old Cole, your Dad, and I'm crazy about your mother!"

"You will be careful, Jeff?"

"Sure, I'll be careful!"

"I mean, about Terry Boyd."

Jeff's face hardened. "He killed my Dad," he said thickly. "I don't know how much more I can take from those 3 B fellers!"

Gospel Cummings listened with a frown on his bearded face. He remembered the scene at the grave; the accusations of the Boyd brothers in Vaca town.

"You don't have to take too much," Connie surprised Gospel by saying. "After all, a man can take only so much. Promise me one thing, Jeff."

"Yeah."

"Just don't start anything with them; you've got lots of friends in town, and Gospel will help you."

"Best friend a leppy ever had," Jeff said gruffly.

"But you are not rightly a leppy."

"I am too; a leppy is a critter what has lost its folks; especially its mother!"

Cummings nodded his head in agreement. His eyes widened when he saw Connie Brighton put a protecting arm around the cowboy's shoulders.

"I'll help all I can," she whispered.

CUMMINGS sighed as they mounted and rode toward Vaca. The tall plainsman changed to his old clothes, then sat down to clean his pistol. He frowned for a moment, arose quickly, and took a spare forty-five from under his bunk, seated it in his worn holster.

With the touch of gun metal in his hands, Gospel Cummings seemed to change. The gentleness left his face, and his eyes lost their brooding sorrow. After carefully cleaning every moving part, Cummings placed the weapon on the table and washed his hands in the granite basin. He was drying his hands when a man's voice spoke hoarsely. "Elevate, you Holy Joe. I've got you over a barrel!"

Gospel Cummings turned his head slowly. Shorty Benson stood framed in the open doorway with a cocked six-shooter in his grimy right fist. "Slapped me open handed yesterday morning, remember? The man don't live who can do that to Shorty Benson!"

"I'm still living," Cummings said quietly.

"That's right, but I can fix it. If you've got any little old prayers to say for yourself, start mumbling!"

"You mean you'd gun me down without giving me a chance?"

"I don't have no conscience to bother me; and I don't throw off my shots!"

"My gun is on the table. Holster yours and give me a chance to break for my hardware!"

"Say! That ain't a bad idea," Benson answered. "I can let you get your smoke-pole in your fist, and cut you down before you can thumb back the trigger; that away, it will be self defense!"

Cummings said quietly, "I'm sorry I slapped you yesterday morning. You can slap me to even the score. This don't call for a killing!"

"It calls for a killing!" Benson said thickly. "I said I'd get you, and I keep my word. Now I'm going to holster my cutter, and you start scrambling for that gun on the table whenever you're so minded!"

Gospel Cummings still had his back to Benson; the tails of his long coat hid the spare weapon he had placed in his holster, and his hands were free from oil. His next move was like the unexpected clap of heat lightning.

Cummings whirled on one boot-heel. His right hand slapped down just as Shorty clawed for the gun in his open holster. Gospel Cummings' six-shooter snouted above the holster, roared thunderously just as Benson's weapon was clearing leather.

The bullet struck Benson's hand, and his own gun exploded to send a slug into the floor at his feet. Benson was swung around; he went to his knees under the shock of the heavy bullet.

Cumming's face was a hard mask as he holstered his six-shooter. One long step took him to the wounded man, and his arms caught Benson under the buttocks. Another step took Cummings to the door, and he threw Shorty across the yard and under the tie-rail.

"You came here with murder in your heart, and I don't aim to have you mess up my house with your cowardly blood!" Cummings said gruffly. "You ain't hurt none to speak of, but you'll never trigger another killer-gun as long as you live!"

"I'm bleeding out!" Benson screamed. "You just about cut my hand off at the wrist!"

"On your feet, you busted flush," Cummings growled. "And stay where you are. I'll wrap a rag around that hand, and help you on your bronc. You can ride into town and see Doc Brady and you can tell him I did it!"

He strode back into his cabin and found a clean rag. He also found the bottle of Three Daisies, and after downing a stiff drink, he carried the bottle outside and poured whiskey over Shorty Benson's bleeding hand. He bound up the wounded hand, and looked about him.

"So you hid your horse out in the Devil's Graveyard; I'll walk back there with you and you tell the rest of that 3 B outfit what happened. Start walking!"

Benson's horse was ground-tied just inside the high rocky entrance to the graveyard, and Cummings boosted the 3 B cowboy to his saddle. He handed the reins to Shorty and hit the horse with the flat of his hand.

"Make tracks going away," he said harshly. "And I'm not sorry I slapped you with the flat of my hand!"

SHORTY BENSON raced toward town, and five minutes later, Jeff Dawson rode into the little yard. He stared at Gospel Cummings at the smoke-grimed pistol in the plainsman's holster. "Does that old outlaw gun shoot straight?"

"It shoots straight," Cummings growled. "That's another one I owe old Jim; that was his gun you left here, and a good thing you did."

He explained what had happened, and Jeff began to scowl. "I had my way, we'd paint for war and take it to that 3 B outfit."

"That ain't the way to do it; time enough when they bring it to us!"

"'Tain't near time enough," Jeff argued. "If it hadn't been for Jim's old gun, that busky would have killed you without turning a hair!"

"On the other hand, he like as not did this all on his own," Cummings explained. "It rankled him because I took the flat of my hand to him yesterday. He considered it a deadly insult, and he was going to wipe it out in blood."

"Thanks for what you said," Dawson changed the subject abruptly.

Cummings appeared puzzled. "What did I say?" he asked.

"About that one good reason I had for not fighting my head," Jeff explained. "Connie Brighton."

"The prettiest little filly in Arizona," Cummings said heartily.

Dawson stared at his companion. "I wonder now," he said slowly. "I wonder how much you heard when I was talking to Connie?"

"If I heard anything, I approved of it; I was busy changing my clothes."

"You've got ears like a bat," Dawson said glumly, and then he squared his shoulders.

The two men ate in silence in the little cabin, and Jeff Dawson washed the dishes and crocks. He came out to sit on the low stoop with Cum-

mings, and for a long time, neither of them spoke. It was Jeff who broke the silence.

"I'm riding out to the Triangle D tomorrow, Gospel," he began. "I want to clean up the house some, and then I'll get Ace Fleming to have his Circle F crew drive my herd over."

"You owe me a few meals," Cummings said slowly; "I'll just ride over with you and collect them."

"But you've got your own business and stuff," Dawson objected. "You're just making that an excuse to give me a hand."

Joe Stevens fired again, but he was badly hurt, and his shot was off.

"Well, mebbe so," Cummings admitted. "But you'll need some help until you get your stock on their own graze."

"I want to ride and mend fence between the Triangle D and the 3 B," Dawson explained, and his young face hardened. "That away, it might keep down some trouble."

"You've got a good brand, and one that would be hard to change," Cummings said thoughtfully. "Whenever a feller gets to talking too much about rustling, I've always found he will bear a heap of watching."

"Been me, I'd have plugged Shorty Benson center; "I've never learned to throw off my shots!"

"That reminds me," Cummings answered. "When I had to lay the law of decency down to Terry Boyd this afternoon, I mentioned that I wouldn't just part his hair. I was watching his face, and if he learns for sure that you triggered the slug that creased him, he'll kill you from the bresh sure as sin."

"I'll keep my eyes open," Jeff promised.

5

JEFF DAWSON swung down at the tie-rail before a neat ranch house on the Triangle D. Gospel Cummings stared at the new chintz curtains which framed the windows from the inside. He nodded his head with understanding.

Dawson dismounted and groundtied his horse with trailing whangs. He walked to the front door, pushed it open, and stood staring at the clean interior. "Someone has been here," he said lamely; "someone has cleaned the whole house!"

"Yeah," Cummings agreed. "That would like as not be Sandra Fleming, Molly Waggoner, and Connie Brighton." He stared at a piece of paper tacked to a panel of the door leading to the kitchen. "Looks like they left you a note, Jeff."

Dawson crossed the room, a smile of anticipation on his face; the smile changed to a scowl. He growled deep in his chest, and Cummings hurried to the cowboy's side. "It's a warning, Gospel."

Gospel Cummings read the message aloud. *"Be warned, outlaw! We know you are after the loot, but you will never live to find it. The James Gang!"*

"From what I heard, old Fred Haney was the last of the James gang," Cummings said slowly.

"Some of those Boyds left this warning; let's ride over there to the 3 B and settle it now!"

"We don't know that it was them," Cummings objected. Then his bearded face lighted up. "Tell you what we can do; we can take tools and mend the fence. That way, we are bound to see some of them."

Dawson scratched his curlv head. "I don't see my wagon," he muttered; "we'd have to take wire and tools."

Gospel Cummings smiled, pointed to a dust cloud coming across the open range. "Wagon coming from the direction of the Circle F."

"Ace Fleming is driving that rig," Jeff said, after a long scrutiny. "And several of his hands are riding behind the wagon."

"Ace is right neighborly," Cummings remarked. "He took your wagon and had it greased and painted. Let's ride out and give him Howdy!"

They mounted their horses and raced to meet the Circle F crew Ace Fleming did not look like a gambler in his working clothes. He greeted the two riders with a broad grin and a cheery: "Howdy", and said they'd help Jeff run his fence between the Triangle D and the 3 B graze.

"Stop off at the house first, Ace," Cummings said to the little gambler. "Some one left a note for Jeff, and you might have some ideas."

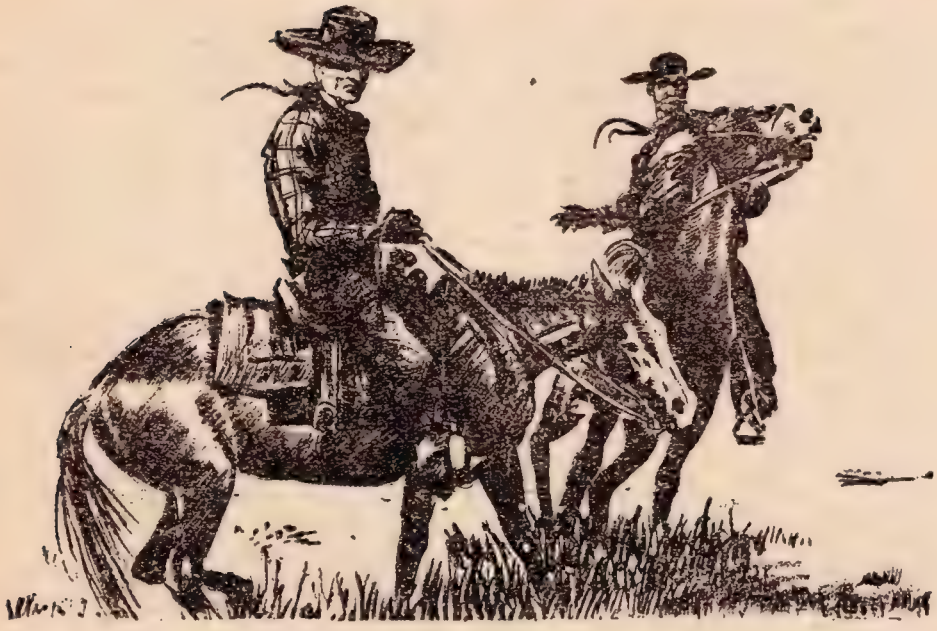
FLEMING tooled his team into the yard, wrapped the lines around the brake-handle, and jumped to the ground. His crew of four sat their horses in the yard, and Ace followed Cummings inside the house and stared at the note on the door.

"I've heard about that outlaw swag," Fleming said thoughtfully. "Someone wants that loot, but they don't know where it is."

"The Boyds," Dawson said.

"I dunno; they've had three years to look for it. It could be somebody else!"

"Shorty Benson!" Dawson guessed.



The Boyd brothers were riding up, and Jeff suspected gun-trouble.

"Not him," Cummings contradicted. "Shorty couldn't have printed that note with his right hand, and he ain't left-handed."

"On top of that, he's in jail," Fleming added. "The Saint arrested him for assault with a deadly weapon; he's holding him until you ride in and sign the complaint, Gospel."

"I'm signing no complaint," Cummings said gruffly. "But the rest will do Shorty good. He lost some blood."

"You should have killed him, Gospel."

Gospel Cummings turned and stared at the gambler's handsome face. Fleming nodded and made his manners.

"I know, old friend," he murmured. "*Thou shalt not kill!*"

"I dunno," Jeff said slowly; "I'd rather be dead than crippled up that away for life."

"Let's get out there to our work," Cummings suggested quickly. "Here it is eight o'clock; it will soon be noon. Half the day gone, and we haven't started to work yet."

He left the house and mounted his sorrel. Fleming climbed to the driver's seat, and the crew started across the rolling range. They reached the boundary of the 3 B in less than an hour, and Fleming stopped his team near a break in the three-strand fence. "Some one cut that panel; how long is your line, Jeff?"

"About a mile," Dawson answered. "The Triangle D is two sections long, and one section wide."

"It won't take long to make that mile section tight," Cummings commented. He turned to stare at the Circle F crew. "Climb down and grab a wire-stretcher, cowboys," he said with a grin. "That day is past when you can do all your work from the saddle."

Gospel Cummings took a can filled with heavy staples, found a hammer in the wagon, and started to work. Three panels were replaced, and the work was finished by the middle of the afternoon.

"Horse-backers coming," Fleming warned, as he watched a small group of riders loping from the east. "Couldn't be any one else but the 3 B crew!"

Four men raced up and slid their horses to a stop near the working

crew. They were the three Boyd brothers, and Red Stang. It was Terry who directed a shouted question at Gospel Cummings. "Did you throw down on Shorty Benson, you old pelican?"

"I did, you young squirt," Cummings answered evenly. "You taking up for him?"

"He was my saddle-pard," Red Stang interrupted quietly. "Right or wrong, I'm taking up for Shorty!"

"I am a man of peace, Red; I never start trouble. I've never run away from it when it was brought to me. It's your play!"

"I'll deal this hand!" Ace Fleming said sharply. "Don't start something you can't finish, Stang. Shorty rode down to Three Points and got Gospel under his gun. He was going to kill Gospel, but Gospel had an ace in the hole. Right now Saint John is holding your pard in the calabozo, waiting for Gospel to ride in and sign a complaint!"

"You going to sign it?" Stang demanded.

Cummings shook his head. "Nuh uh; I shot the gun from Shorty's hand, but he won't ever trigger another cutter."

"I'm sorry I went on the prod that away, Cummings," Red Stang said quietly, and Terry stared at the tall redhead.

"Hell, I ain't eating crow!" he snarled viciously. "Shorty Benson was working for the 3 B!"

"So what?" Cummings asked.

"So we stand behind him!" Terry rapped out.

TOM BOYD rubbed his chin and glanced at his brother Dixon. "What do you make of this?"

"Looks to me like Shorty got what was coming to him," Dixon answered thoughtfully. "He rode into town without orders, and he rode down to Three Points on his own. If Cummings wants to sue Shorty, and we stand behind him, that makes us responsible for his acts!"

Terry stared at his brothers, and his face darkened with anger. The cast in his left eye slanted upward, and he turned on Gospel Cummings with a savage curse. "I'll stand behind Shorty!" he shouted. "I've likewise got unfinished business with you for what you did yesterday in Hell's Half Acre!"

Gospel Cummings sighed. He was on the ground, and he spoke to Terry Boyd who still sat his saddle. "Climb down out of your hull, cowboy. I don't want to shoot a horse, but we might as well get this settled!"

"Let me have him, Gospel!" Jeff pleaded. "That damn gun-sneak killed old Jim!"

"Jim Dawson had a killing coming!" Tom interrupted.

"Keep out of this, Jeff," Cummings said quietly. "Get down off that 3 B horse, Terry Boyd!"

"Climb down, Terry," Dixon growled at his younger brother; "you asked for it, and by dogies, you'll face it square!"

Terry dismounted just as a big man rode from a copse of alders at a dead run. There was no mistaking the burly figure of John Saint John, and he rode between Terry and Gospel Cummings. "What's going on here?"

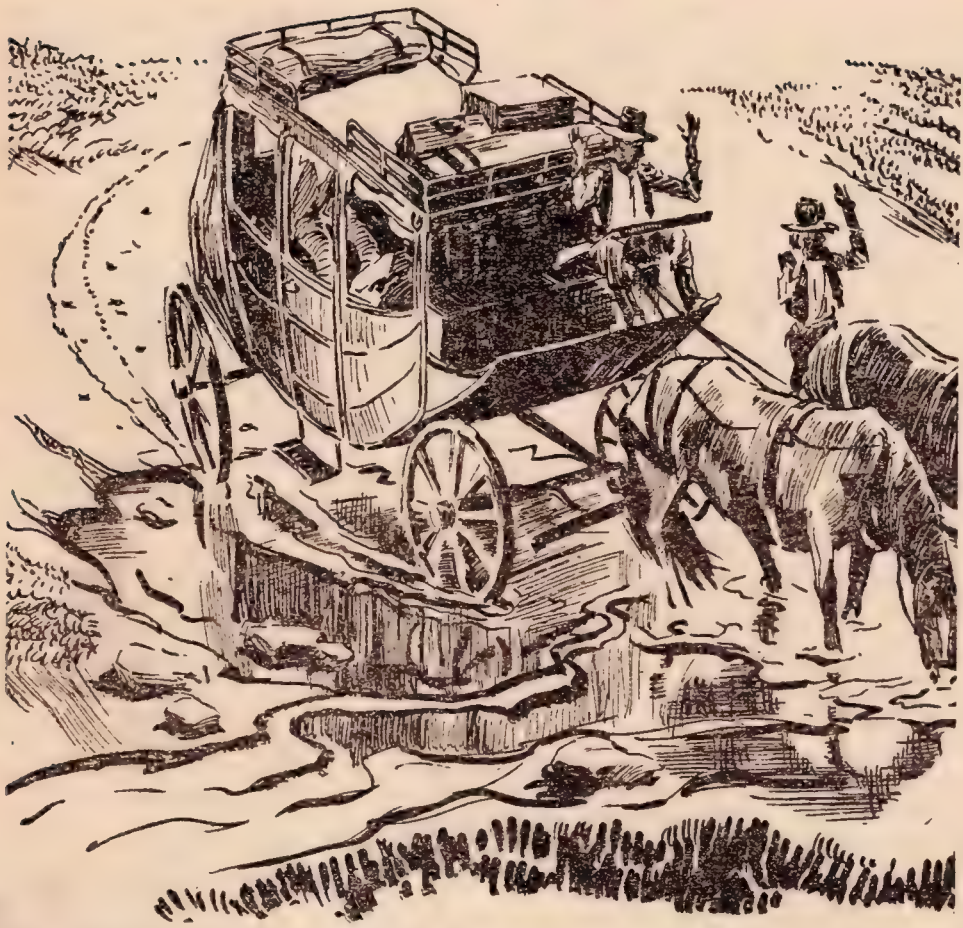
Gospel Cummings remained silent, as did Terry. It was Tom Boyd who broke the silence. "We just rode over to see who was pounding on this boundary fence," he told Saint John. "And while you're here, it will save me a trip to town. Gospel won't sign a complaint against Shorty Benson, so when you get back to town, turn him loose. Tell him to make tracks going away!"

Saint John turned angrily on Gospel Cummings. "You're obstructing the law!" he accused. "If you was any kind of a citizen, you'd ride in and sign that complaint!"

"I'm not that kind of a citizen," Cummings answered quietly; "turn Shorty loose!"

The deputy swore softly and turned to Red Stang. "Your pard was asking for you, Stang," he growled. "He wants the loan of a month's pay for a riding stake. That is, unless you want to quit the country with him."

"I like this country," Red said



Old Jim Dawson had been tagged as the owlhoot who'd lifted the Bar F payroll.

lazily. He turned to Tom Boyd. "I've got a month's pay coming, and so has Shorty," he reminded; "if you'll pay it over to the law, he can give it to Shorty for a riding stake!"

Tom Boyd dug down into his hip pocket and brought out a thick roll of paper money. He counted out eighty dollars, handed it to Saint John, and returned the roll to his pocket.

"Give that to Shorty, and tell him to get long gone," Boyd said sourly. "We'll be getting back to headquarters. Come on, you rannies!"

THE FOUR 3 B men whirled their horses and raced away without another word. Jeff Dawson stared at their loping horses, and turned to study Cummings. Saint John nodded his head and spoke curtly. "You and Terry Boyd was fixing to shoot it out," he stated. "The law would like to know why?"

"It was nothing at all," Cummings murmured. "Just a little difference of opinion, as you might say."

"So for one time you figured to keep Terry honest," Saint John guessed shrewdly; "you had enough witnesses!"

"That's right."

"Keep on talking," the big deputy said irritably. "What was this difference of opinion?"

Cummings shrugged and turned to Fleming. "You remember what it was about?" he asked the gambler.

"Something about not turning Shorty Benson loose," Fleming said carelessly. "It didn't seem important

to me, so I didn't listen very close." He turned to Dawson. "I'll have the Circle F crew move your herd over tomorrow, Jeff."

"Thanks for everything, Ace."

Saint John swore angrily. "Ignore the law, you unwashed cow nurses! There will come a day when you will want the law to give you a hand!"

"When that day comes, we'll ask for it," Cummings spoke over his shoulder.

"We'll ride back with you away, Saint," Fleming suggested; "we're about through here."

"I've got law business back in town," the deputy growled. "He rides fastest who rides alone!"

He whirled his horse and heeled the spurs home to spurt the big bay in a sudden burst of speed. Fleming watched the deputy's departure with a smile, and then he spoke thoughtfully to Cummings. "The Saint stopped a gun-play, Gospel. Did you aim to throw off your shot...like always?"

"Like always," Cummings admitted quietly. "There are no accidents in destiny. The Saint rode up just in time, and if he hadn't, something else would have happened."

"Yeah," Fleming murmured. "I can't quite savvy Tom Boyd," he said slowly. "He and Dix didn't side Terry one bit; what do you make of that, Gospel?"

"I want time to think that part over; maybe we misjudged those 3 B fellers!"

"They rode down after old Jim!" Jeff interrupted hotly. "And they killed him on a sneak!"

"You saw them kill him?"

"I saw Terry Boyd do it!" Dawson almost shouted.

"Lay your hackles, son," Cummings said soothingly. "That's part of my thinking. You saw Terry shoot old Jim; where were Tom and Dixon at the time?"

"They were up on that hog-back near Lobo's peak."

"That's almost a mile from where old Jim was shot," Cummings said slowly.

"But they were riding after old Jim," Dawson snarled.

"That's right," Cummings agreed. "Now look at it this away, Jeff. Say you had lost a payroll of two thousand dollars; you'd try to do something about it, wouldn't you?"

"Jim never did that job!"

"You and I know that, but what about Tom and Dix Boyd?" Cummings asked.

"Gospel made a point there, Jeff," Fleming cut in. "Don't you see it, Jeff? Looks to me like Tom and Dixon Boyd don't hold with everything Terry has done. They even forced him to face Gospel for a showdown!"

"I'll face that killer some day!" Jeff Dawson promised grimly. "When I do, I won't throw off my shot!"

"Yeah...well, may that day be long deferred," Cumming said hopefully. "Let's leave it the way it is for now, Jeff. Let's sleep over it, and be guided by what happens from now on!"

"I made old Jim a promise!" Jeff Dawson muttered. "I'll keep that promise if I have to play it lone-handed!"

"Which you won't," Cummings assured the angry youngster. "How long has Shorty Benson and Red Stang been on the 3 B payroll?"

Ace Fleming glanced at one of his crew. "You know how long, Charley?"

CHARLEY BAILEY was a tall, strapping cowboy of perhaps twenty-four. He had not spoken a word during the arguments; cowboys learn early to listen well, and speak when they have something to say. "Little over seven months. That Red Stang is quite a poker player; he cleaned me of three-months pay one time."

"Where are they from?" Fleming asked.

Charley Bailey shrugged his wide shoulders. "They rode up here from the Nations."

"Oklahoma is a pretty big place," Fleming murmured.

"That Red Stang is a damn good shot with a six-pistol," Bailey offered carelessly. "From what I gath-

ered, he sold his gun more than once down there in the Nations."

Jeff listened intently. He remembered the fist fight with the lanky 3 B cowboy, then he saw Gospel Cummings watching his face. "I'm faster than Stang with a cutter."

Bailey shook his head doubtfully, but he did not speak. It was none of his business, but he had seen Red Stang use a six-shooter.

"You think Red has Jeff faded with his hardware?" Ace Fleming asked the big cowboy.

"I never saw Jeff work none with his tools," Bailey answered bluntly. "But I was riding with Stang one day close to the lavas. A big old diamond-back slithered out of the grass, and Stang cut that serpent's head off with one shot before I had cleared leather with my smoke-pole. Then his six roared again, and he severed the head from that old rattler's mate. Fastest shooting I ever saw, and the straightest!"

Jeff looked thoughtful, and Gospel Cummings smiled. Fleming tugged at his clipped mustache and spoke slowly. "Must be a lot of good in that red-headed puncher. He and Jeff had a fist fight, and Red never made a pass for his hardware. He took his beating like a man, which is more than I can say for his saddle-pard."

"Another thing," Cummings interrupted. "Red didn't side his pard when Shorty rode down to kill me on a sneak. Then he gives his riding pay to his pard, but looks like he don't want no more truck with him."

"He leaves me alone, I'll mind my own business," Jeff said quietly. "But you gents are overlooking one thing that struck me as funny."

"Such as...?" Fleming asked.

"Red Stang and Terry Boyd," Dawson continued. "They seem to understand each other, and those other two Boyds seem to know the score."

"I noticed that," Cummings said. "That's another one of the things I want to think about."

"I want to thank all you hands for helping me," Jeff Dawson said earnestly. "I couldn't have made it alone, and I know it; I will always be in your debt for what you did for me, Ace."

"Think nothing of it," Fleming said with a smile. "We try to be neighborly here in the Strip, and we cattlemen have got to stick together."

"We might as well be getting back to the house," Cummings suggested. "And you Circle F fellers will have your own chores to do."

"Another thing," Dawson said, and he swallowed hard. "Thank Sandra and Molly for fixing up my house for me."

"You mean you don't want me to thank Connie Brighton? It was Connie who got Sandra and Molly to help her fix your *casa*."

"Mebbe Jeff wants to thank Connie himself," Cummings teased.

"Yeah, that's right," Dawson said. "I'll thank Connie myself, the next time I see her."

"Make it tomorrow night," Fleming suggested. "Sandra is giving a dance at the Circle F to welcome a wandering cowboy back home. A waddy by the name of Jefferson Davis Dawson."

6

ACE Fleming's circle F ranch-house was brilliantly lighted for the welcome-home dance. Riders were arriving from all the neighboring ranches, and the musicians were tuning their instruments in the large living room. A square-dance in cattle country is something to be long remembered. The dancing continues until the break of day; the old dance with the young, and the young dance with each other.

Molly Waggoner and Connie Brighton had helped Sandra Fleming with the preparations. Sandra ran to greet Gospel Cummings as he

Jeff Dawson had learned what it was like to be a hunted man.

came into the room with Jeff Dawson. Sandra was a pretty woman in her late twenties. She put her arms around the gaunt plainsman and kissed him affectionately. "I'm mighty glad you came, Gospel," she said happily. "And I want the first dance with you."

"I'm not so much on the Dossie-doe any more, but how can I refuse?" Cummings answered with a smile. "Seems only yesterday that you came out here from Frisco to sing in the Casino. How long have you and Ace been married, honey?"

"Three years," Sandra answered

promptly. She drew closer and whispered a question. "Is Jeff feeling better now?"

"He's kinda mixed up," Cummings answered guardedly; "he thinks a heap of Connie Brighton."

"And she talks of nothing else except Jeff," Sandra confided.

"When did you girls leave the Triangle D after you fixed up Jeff's house?"

"About eight that night," Sandra answered. "Ace rode over to see us home. Why do you ask, Gospel?"

"Someone was there after you left," Cummings explained. "Left a note pinned to a door for Jeff."

"More trouble?"

Cummings nodded his head. "Looks like," he admitted. His eyes narrowed as Red Stang came into the room, dressed in his cowboy best. "You invite the 3 B outfit?" Cummings asked.

"Not personally, but every one was invited," Sandra answered. "You know how cowboys are when there's a dance."

Jeff was talking to Connie Brighton, and he was holding Connie's left hand.

"Can I have the first dance?" Dawson asked hopefully.

Connie nodded. "And the last, if you like," she promised.

"That means I can take you home to the Box B," Jeff said with a happy smile. "I must be living right since I came out of the tangles!"

"Try to forget those years," Connie urged. "You are a cattleman now, Jeff. You've been a cowboy all your life, and you will do well."

"I'll owe it to Ace Fleming and old Gospel, if I do."

RED STANG approached the pair, and he smiled at Connie. "Please, can I have the second dance? I know the Triangle D waddy has done spoken for the first."

"You may have the second dance," Connie agreed. "Do you boys know each other?"

"We've met," Jeff said bluntly.

"He whipped me with his maulies," Red Stang said with a wide smile. "He jumped me so fast, and hit me so often I thought he was twins!"

"And there's no hard feelings?" Connie asked wonderingly.

"Shucks no," Stang said slowly. "A cowboy will fight for money or marbles, or he will fight for fun and frolic. No hard feelings, and here's my hand on it, Dawson!"

Jeff Dawson stiffened, then he accepted the proffered hand. "No hard feelings on my part either."

He glanced down at the shine on the right leg of Stang's frontier pants. All the men had checked their six-shooters in a side room, or had left them in their saddle bags. This was common courtesy in cow-country.

Red looked at Jeff with a level gaze. He started to speak, changed his mind, and drew a deep breath.

"You was going to say?" Dawson prompted.

"This ain't the time to say it; I'll ride over and see you tomorrow."

"I'm curious," Connie admitted frankly. "Please ask him now, Red."

"Well, I was thinking that Dawson was short-handed on the Triangle D," Stang began hesitantly. "I'm a fair cow-camp cook, a top-hand with horses and cattle, and I'd make you a good hand at the same money the 3 B is paying me."

Jeff frowned. Was this a plant to place a 3 B man where he could report to the Boyds? "I'll think it over, Red...I'll let you know before the dance is over."

The three-piece orchestra struck up with *"Buffalo Gals"*, and Jeff claimed Connie for the first dance. As they whirled lightly across the floor to complete a square, Red Stang sought another partner as the caller began his chores. Gospel Cummings smiled as Jim Waggoner chanted a cow-country doggered.

Grab yore partner and swing her so,
Hold her tight, and dip her low;
Dance with the gal who looks so sweet,
And dance with the gal with the great big feet!

Gospel Cummings strolled across the room to talk to Cole Brighton, Connie's father, and owner of the big Box B outfit. The old cattleman was a tall, vigorous man in his late fifties; he greeted Cummings cordially, jerked his head toward Connie and Jeff Dawson. "They make a handsome pair; I hope that Dawson boy settles down and makes a solid citizen."

"He's bound to do it," Cummings said confidently. "I knew his Dad when old Jim was Jeff's age. When Jim got married, he settled down and did right well."

"Young Jeff ain't of age yet," Brighton grunted; "he won't be

thinking of marriage for quite a while."

"You want to bet?"

"Did he say anything about it?" Brighton asked anxiously.

"Well, you might say that actions speak louder than words," Cummings answered. "He thinks a lot of Connie, and she don't seem to dislike him any."

"Connie ain't but eighteen."

"How old was Connie's mother when you married her?" Cummings asked bluntly.

Cole Brighton stroked his long white cowhorn mustaches. "By dogies," he murmured. "She was just eighteen when I married Rose!"

The music stopped, and Red Stang claimed Connie for the second dance. Cummings nudged Cole Brighton when Jeff Dawson started toward them. Dawson took a chair near the two men, and he nudged Cummings with an elbow.

"I've been thinking, Gospel," Dawson said hesitantly. "I'm going to need some help on the Triangle D. Would you consider some kind of a partnership with me? There's room enough for both of us on the Triangle D, and I was hoping...?"

Gospel Cummings shook his head. "Thanks, Jeff, but you know how it is. I'm the boss of Hell's Half Acre, and that's where my work is. You need a younger man."

"A feller asked me for a job, Gospel," Dawson admitted. "But I'm not sure."

Cummings appeared surprised. "Must have happened recent," he said slowly. "Who was this cowhand?"

"Red Stang!"

Gospel Cummings jerked up with a startled look in his brown eyes. Then he relaxed and stroked his silky brown beard. "Red is a good hand, but we don't know much about him. Far as that goes, we don't know much about any wandering cow-poke who drifts in looking for a riding job. You going to take him on?"

"I wanted to talk to you about it," Dawson said hesitantly. "He offered me his hand in front of Connie; said he had no hard feelings because I had bested him in that skull-and-knuckle ruckus."

"He'd make a better friend than an enemy...if he was a friend," Cummings remarked. "Tell you what, Jeff. I'll stay on with you a few days, and you put Red on the payroll. I'll watch him close, and we will soon find out what kind of a critter he is."

"That sounds sensible to me," Cole Brighton interrupted. "I couldn't help hearing the talk, and that Red Stang is a good cowhand."

RED STANG escorted Connie to the place where the three men were talking, and thanked her for the dance. Jeff had asked for the next dance, but he spoke to Stang before taking to the dance floor. "You're on the Triangle D payroll, starting tomorrow, Red."

"Well thanks, boss," Red Stang answered with a grin. "I've got my soogans on a spare horse out in the corral. You see I quit the 3 B this afternoon."

Gospel and Cole Brighton exchanged glances; Jeff Dawson looked surprised, but he swept Connie in his arms as the music started. Cummings spoke quietly to Stang. "Did you have any trouble with Terry Boyd?"

The tall redhead frowned and stared at the bearded plainsman. He hesitated before answering; shook his head. "I had words with Tom Boyd; it was on account of Shorty Benson."

Gospel Cummings did not know what to say. He knew that Stang and Benson had been saddle-mates. "Sorry I had to cripple Benson that away. You and Shorty are not much alike, Red."

"I met him down in Tulsa," Stang said slowly. "We were both on the loose, so we just rode together. I didn't know Shorty before that time, but Shorty is leaving town, and I'm staying here."

"Do you like Jeff Dawson?"

Red Stang nodded as a grin spread over his long bony face. "I like him," he said slowly. "He's the first

waddy who has whipped me in quite a spell. And when you can't whip 'em, jine 'em. On top of that, I need a job."

"So you've got one. You do the right thing with Jeff, he'll do the square thing with you. Now I have to see a man about a dog."

Cummings stretched to his feet and crossed the crowded room. He walked outside, stepped behind a string of horses tied at the rail, and reached for his right coat tail. "Like the Guvnor of South Carolina said to the Guvnor of North Carolina," he muttered. "It's a long time between drinks!"

HE WAS wiping his beard with the back of his hand when a single horse-backer rode into the big Circle F yard. Cummings frowned when Terry Boyd swung down and tied his 3 B horse with trailing reins.

Boyd walked to the open front door, and Cummings remained behind the horses. He did reach to his saddle-bags on old Fred, and Cummings slipped his old Peacemaker forty-five into his holster.

Terry was armed, but he did not enter the house. He jerked his head at some one inside, and after a moment, Red Stang came outside. "You wanted to see me?" the tall redhead asked.

Terry stepped away from the door. "What's the idea of rolling your bed and quitting the 3 B without telling me?"

"I had good reasons."

"What reasons?"

"Tom said I was all through at the 3 B," Stang answered; "I was going to quit nohow."

"Traveling with Shorty mebbe?"

Stang shook his head. "I'm staying here," he answered. "I've already got me another job, and one I'll like better."

"With who?"

"Look, Mister," Stang answered quietly. "Since when you got a license to ride over here to a celebration and put me on the griddle?"

"Since you quit the 3 B!" Boyd answered bluntly. "Who you going to work for?"

"It ain't none of your business, but I signed on with the Triangle D. And I fight for the iron that pays me my wages."

"Nuh uh," Terry contradicted. "You'll fight for the man who pays you the most money. I'll pay you another fifty a month to keep me posted."

Gospel Cummings crouched behind the horses, listening intently. He caught his breath sharply when Red Stang spoke in a whisper. "I'll take it, Boyd. I know what you're looking for!"

"I'll see you every day or so over by that first panel in the fence Dawson mended today," Boyd said guardedly, "I'm not welcome here, so I'll be riding along!"

Boyd mounted his horse and rode into the darkness. Red Stang walked back into the house. Gospel Cummings reached for his bottle and drank thoughtfully.

Cummings was not often fooled in his judgment of men, and he admitted that he had liked Red Stang. With Stang planted on the Triangle D, in the pay of Terry Boyd...?

Gospel shook his head to acknowledge that he was puzzled. He decided to wait a day or two, and see what would happen, hid the six-shooter in his saddle-bags and went back to the house.

The dancers were swirling about the floor, and some of the older men were gathered in the kitchen where Sandra Fleming had provided a bountiful feast. Ace Fleming was helping his wife, but he came to the side of Cummings as the tall man of peace entered the kitchen.

"Anything wrong, Gospel?"

"Nothing I can be sure of, Ace; What do you think of Red Stang?"

"There's a job here on the Circle F for him when ever he wants it," Fleming answered promptly. "Why do you ask?"

"He's signed up to ride for the Triangle D," Cummings told the little gambler. "And he just talked to Terry Boyd outside the house."

"Boyd rode over here after what

happened yesterday?" Fleming murmured. "What did he want?"

"He's paying Red fifty a month to keep him posted."

"It's about that outlaw loot," Fleming said.

"Yeah. Now where does that put Red?"

"Where *does* it put him?"

"He could be kin to old Fred Haney," Cummings answered musingly. "He could be some part of the law, or he could be on the make, and playing in with Terry Boyd for a cut of the loot!"

"Let it ride for a time, Gospel. Watch Stang close, and you'll learn more about him?"

"He's a Texan," Cummings said positively. "It takes one Tehanner to know another one!"

RED STANG wandered into the kitchen, and the two men stopped talking. Sandra Fleming invited Stang to help himself, and the tall cowboy accepted the invitation eagerly. Then he saw Gospel Cummings, and came over with his plate.

"I'll ride back with you to the Triangle D, Gospel," he invited himself. "Seeing that Jeff is going to take Connie Brighton home."

"I'm heading back soon," Cummings answered carelessly. "I thought you yearlings would stay 'til the last cat was hung."

"I've had enough dancing," Stang answered shortly. "So just say the word when you get ready to start for home."

"What kind of a hombre is Terry Boyd, when you get to know him well?"

Red Stang turned swiftly. "I reckon he's all right. I did my work, and we didn't mix much with the bosses. They lived in the big house; the crew lived in the bunkhouse."

"I mean, he's not much like his brother Tom," Cummings continued. "I'd say that Tom Boyd is the balance wheel on that outfit."

"He's got a level head," Stang agreed. "Matter of fact, Terry is in debt to Tom and Dixon. He lost a lot of money gambling, and he don't own much of the 3 B."

"Well, that's his own business," Cummings said with a shrug. "Every man has his failings. What part of Texas do you hail from?"

"I didn't say I was from Texas."

"Southern part," Cummings said quietly. "Down around the Big Bend."

"I've been around Austin and Amarillo," Stang admitted. "But then, I've been over most of Texas.'"

"Terry Boyd traveled down that away for quite a while," Cummings said, as though he was making conversation. "He just came back here about a year ago, and Tom didn't like it much at the time."

"How many head of stock does Jeff run?" Stang changed the subject.

"Close to four hundred head of cattle. About forty head of horses, and he's got about twenty head of saddle-stock to break for work."

"I'm a fair bronc-stomper," Stang said, and he wasn't boasting. "I'll help Jeff break out those colts for work."

Jeff Dawson came into the big kitchen with Connie; Jeff excused himself and came over to Stang and Cummings. "I'm going to ride home with Connie. You fellers don't need to wait up for me, but I'll see you at breakfast."

"You having a good time?" Cummings asked with a smile.

"Best time I ever had in my life, Gospel. So you show Red where to bed down, and don't worry about me."

"Keep your eyes open when you ride alone," Cummings warned. "Stay away from the 3 B, just in case Terry Boyd might be out riding tonight."

He watched the face of Red Stang as he spoke, but the tall redhead showed no surprise. He was watching Connie Brighton as the pretty girl talked to Sandra Fleming, and when Jeff joined Connie, Cummings nudged Stang gently. "I believe I'll get on back to the Triangle D, Red. You ready to go?"

"I'm ready," Stang answered.

"I'm going to try to earn my pay on the Triangle D, Gospel. You know that, don't you?"

"Sure, sure," Cummings answered. "Let's make tracks for our bunks. This shindig will last to the crack of dawn, and I'm not as young as I used to be by at least twenty years!"

They thanked Sandra and Ace Fleming for a good time, left the house, and mounted their horses. Cummings took his six-shooter from the saddle-bags and snugged it down in the holster. Red Stang reached into his bed-roll and brought out his own forty-five Colt. He turned his head when Cummings turned his back and bent an elbow. Then the two men rode into the darkness, each busy with his own thoughts.

7

CONNIE Brighton smiled happily as she rode across the open range with Jeff Dawson. A faint streak of light showed in the east; the couple had danced all night. Cole Brighton had left at midnight for the Box B, shortly after Gospel Cummings had left the Circle F with Red Stang.

"It's good to be back home again," Dawson said gratefully. "It got mighty lonesome back there on Lobo's Peak, and most of the time I was thinking of you, Connie."

"We were both growing up," Connie said gravely. "I was finishing school, and thinking some of going to college on the west coast."

Jeff appeared alarmed. "That would take you another four years," he protested. "I couldn't do without you that long!"

Connie pressed his hand and made no reply. They were skirting a bosque of trees near a flowing creek, and Connie Brighton shivered slightly. "That leads to the badlands," she whispered. "I've never liked it back there."

"Stand them hosses!" a gruff voice interrupted sharply. "Keep them hands high, yearling!"

Dawson's right hand started for his pistol, but he quickly changed his mind and raised both hands to a level with his shoulders when he saw four masked men covering him with cocked six-shooters.

"I've got little money on me," Dawson said quietly. "You're welcome to what I have!"

"Thanks, and we'll take it," a bearded ruffian answered with a sneer. "Ride up there and take his hardware, Joe," he told one of his companions.

Jeff Dawson jerked when he felt the twitch which emptied his holster. A gun probed his spine instantly, and a hoarse voice spoke a warning. "Make a move, and I'll empty your saddle and dump your carcass into Lost River!"

"My wallet is in my left hip pocket," Dawson said slowly. "Take it, and let us ride on!"

"I'll give the orders," the bearded leader growled. "You and the gal is taking a little ride with us. We want to talk some where we won't be interrupted."

Connie gasped and protested. "My father will be worried about me" she said. "He is Cole Brighton, of the Box B!"

"Let the old mosshead worry," the beaded leader said roughly. "Bend the lead, Joe. You two Pilgrims follow Joe. The rest of us will bring up the drag, and don't try to make a break!"

"Do like he says," Jeff told Connie quietly. "We're not in a position to argue."

The man called Joe, rode ahead. Connie and Jeff followed, and the other three riders closed in and brought up the rear. They rode for an hour, and just as dawn was breaking, the horses climbed a steep trail and entered a big cave.

Jeff Dawson caught his breath sharply. He was familiar with the badlands, but Connie seemed bewildered. "This is Lost River Cave." Jeff explained. "You remember where

the river gets lost and flows underground back yonder?"

Connie nodded. "It comes out again in this cave," Jeff explained. "Then it wanders down into a big valley."

"You learned the country right well when you and your old man was on the dodge," the bearded man said. "You and the gal light down and rest your saddles!"

"What about the rest of us, Ben?" one of the guards asked.

"Joe Stevens stays here with me to guard the prisoners," Whiskers answered. "My name is Ben Stokes," he told Jeff; "mean anything to you?"

"The Stokes gang! I heard you fellers operated down in Texas and Oklahoma."

"That's right," Stokes agreed. "But we needed a rest from robbing trains and the like. So we came up here to make a try at that loot the James Boys hid out in these parts."

"Those other two will be Ad Cross and Tod Werner," Dawson said slowly. "The law will be looking for you!"

"The law has been looking for us for years," Stokes said with a shrug. "We carry our own law in our holsters!"

CONNIE BRIGHTON sat down on a limestone pillar which had fallen on its side. A small fire was burning at the back of the cave; the flickering flames threw shadows and light on glistening stalactites which hung from the high ceiling.

Jeff sat down beside Connie, and Ben Stokes studied the pair. "Cole Brighton's gal, eh?" he said thoughtfully. "That old He will pay a pretty penny to get you back again!"

"So you make war on women," Dawson said scathingly. "Do what you want with me, but let Connie ride back home!"

"I take what I want!" Stokes answered arrogantly. "What are you going to do about it?"

Jeff seethed with anger. There was little he could do about it, but he whispered to Connie. "Don't worry. Gospel will read the sign!"

"What's that?" Stokes demanded.

"I told her not to worry," Dawson answered without hesitation. "She knows nothing about the James loot."

"But *you* do," Stokes said with a smile. "Whereabouts is that cave located on your Triangle D spread?"

"I wish I knew," Dawson answered honestly. "Like you know, I just came in out of the tangles after my Dad was killed."

"Did Terry Boyd find the loot?"

"If he did, I know nothing about it," Dawson said slowly. "I don't believe any one ever found the loot."

"Don't feed me any of that hogwash!" Stokes said angrily. "You and your old man had plenty of time on your hands. You know where the loot is, and you better give up head and start talking with your mouth wide open!"

The other two men came back to the fire, after leading the horses to a hidden recess farther back in the cave. They took seats on bedrolls and listened to the talk.

"We never found the cave," Dawson said stubbornly. "We looked when we had a chance, but we never found anything!"

"Jim Dawson was an owlhooter the same as us," Stokes said more quietly. "We found sign where you and him had been digging all over the Triangle D!"

"We did no digging," Dawson answered, and he seemed puzzled. "Where did you find fresh sign?"

"In five places. Every one of them were between little hills."

"I haven't had time to ride around," Dawson stated truthfully. "I can't help you in any way. Better change your mind and let Connie and me ride on out, and we'll keep still about meeting you!"

Stokes threw back his head and laughed. "Just like that! You ain't rightly got the velvet rubbed off your horns yet, yearling."

"Look, Stokes," Dawson said earnestly. "You don't know these cattlemen up here in the Strip. John Saint John is the law, and every cowman in the Strip will ride with him to hunt you down. They won't take any rest until they rescue Connie!"

"That gives me an idea," Stokes muttered. "They won't shoot too much if they do find us, as long as we hold the gal. Put a piggin' string on her wrists, Joe. If Dawson goes on the prod, I'll drill him center!"

"Hold him under your cutter, and I'll hobble him first," Stevens suggested. "That away you won't have to kill him."

JEFF DAWSON clenched his teeth, but there was nothing he could do. He stared into the bore of Stokes' forty-five Colt, and Stevens slipped a piggin' string around his wrists; bound them behind Dawson's back. Then he bound Connie who gasped and lowered her head.

"We didn't leave any sign," Stokes said quietly. "You, Dawson. You'll either tell us where that loot is, or we'll dump you in the deep river. If old man Cole Brighton sends a gang up here, we'll do likewise with his gal. Now you two think it over while me and the boys get breakfast. Joe, you stay on guard!"

"What will we do?" Connie whispered to Jeff, when the three men went to the fire and dipped stew from a big kettle.

"We'll save our strength, and wait," Dawson whispered. "Gospel Cummings can read sign where other men would never see any: I brushed my horse against the brush, and Gospel will follow the trail."

Connie shuddered. "Do you think they will kill us?"

Dawson did not answer at once. He was listening to a dull distant rumble, and Connie heard it too. "That's Lost River," he whispered. "Don't worry, honey. It will take time for them to send word to your father, and you will be safe for a while!"

"But what about you?"

Dawson shrugged. "I'm more used to it," he said slowly. "I was hiding out for nearly three years. I know the Triangle D, and mebbe I can make a deal with Stokes to help him look for the loot."

"You telling the filly how much you love her?" Stevens asked.

"That's right," Dawson answered. "We were going to be married!"

Connie Brighton gasped and then drew closer to Dawson. "We were?"

"Now ain't that a shame?" Stevens murmured. "You two lovebirds were figuring on a new nest, and we ride in here and bust up all your plans. They ain't no justice, seems as though."

"But there is," Jeff Dawson answered quickly. "I was on the owlhoot trail for three years, and I was cleared when Dad was killed. That's proof enough that there is justice in these parts!"

"And what did it get you? You're right back in the badlands where you started!"

Ben walked up to the pair and wiped his mouth with the back of one big hand. "Have you decided to play it my way?"

"Yeah," Jeff surprised Stokes with his answer. "I know of several old caves on the Triangle D, and I could lead you to them. When do we start?"

"Quit stalling for time!" Stokes answered bluntly. "You and your old man found that loot. I want to know where it is!"

"It might have been found," Dawson said. "Terry Boyd has been looking for it!"

"Mebbe he's double-crossed us, Ben," Joe Stevens interrupted. "Mebbe Boyd found the loot, and brought us in to take the blame for him!"

Stokes furrowed his brow and then shook his head. "He wouldn't dare take a chance," he said positively. "We got that 3 B payroll robbery on him, and he knows it!"

JEFF DAWSON leaned forward, listening intently. Old history was being brought to light, and Stokes noticed his interest. "So you think Terry Boyd might have found the loot?"

"He was looking for it," Jeff answered quietly.

"Not that it matters, but Terry rigged that payroll stickup," Stokes said with a grin. "Take a good look at Joe Stevens yonder. Does he look familiar to you?"

"I never saw him before."

"Say he was dressed up in your

old man's clothes," Stokes suggested. "With a mask on his face, and straddling a Triangle D cayuse!"

Jeff stared at Stevens, and the truth struck him like a flash of heat lightning. "You mean Stevens held up that 3 B cowboy, and took the payroll!" he said slowly. "That job put me and Dad on the owlhoot, and left the Triangle D for Terry Boyd!"

"I believe we can use you, yearling," Stokes said. "We will watch Terry Boyd and his brothers. You can tell us where to look for a likely cave on the Triangle D. We ought to turn up something, and we can always get ten thousand from Cole Brighton for the gal!"

"I won't play it that away," Dawson declared stubbornly. "Tell you what I'll do, Stokes. Let Connie ride out and I'll sell every head of cattle I own to pay you the difference. I can mebbe so raise about eight thousand dollars!"

"It's an idea," Stokes admitted. "I'll save it for an ace in the hole. But eight thousand ain't a drop in the bucket compared to that loot the James Boys hid out here somewhere."

"My father will pay you the ransom," Connie spoke up hopefully. "Provided I am not harmed in any way!"

"He will pay, or you might get worse than harmed!" Stokes said. "Tie her loose, and let her write a note to her old man, Joe!"

Joe Stevens released the girl and handed her a cheap tablet and a pencil. Jeff brooded in silence, and he seemed miles away. Stokes watched the cowboy, and spoke grimly. "I know how you feel, Dawson." he surprised Jeff. "It was Terry Boyd who killed your Pa!"

"I'll settle with him!" Dawson swore savagely. "I'll get him if it costs me the Triangle D, and everything in the world!"

Connie Brighton stopped writing. "You mean that, Jeff?"

Dawson nodded his curly head. "I made a promise to a dead man," he muttered. "That comes first with me!"

Connie leaned closer to him. "I love you for that, Jeff," she whispered. "I wouldn't want it any other way. But do it the law-way, Jeff!"

Dawson shook his head angrily. "I want to face that double-crossing killer with a gun in my fist! I want to tunnel his thieving heart and feel the gun kick against my hand!"

"That's telling 'em!" Ben Stokes applauded. "Terry Boyd sent for us to come up here. Don't know where he got the thousand dollars he sent me, and I don't care!"

Jeff Dawson leaped to his feet. "Tie me loose, Stokes!" he pleaded. "I'll give you my word to sell my stock and give you every dollar. Terry Boyd collected a thousand dollar reward for killing Jim Dawson, my Dad!"

"I'll think it over, Dawson," Stokes promised. "How you coming with that note, gal?" he asked Connie Brighton.

"I've finished it."

"Read it to me," Stokes demanded.

CONNIE glanced at Dawson, cleared her throat, and began to read the note she had written.

Dear Dad;

Jeff and I were caught by four outlaws. They will kill me unless you pay them ten thousand dollars. Please leave the money in that line shack near Hunter's Springs tonight at twelve. Tell no one if you want to see me alive. Connie.

"That's a tophand job," Stokes praised. He turned to Tod Werner and spoke sharply. "Gear your horse and see that old man Cole Brighton gets this note."

As Werner took the note and left for his horse, Stokes spoke to Cross and Stevens. "You boys turn in and get some sleep," he told them. "I'll watch the prisoners, and they look like they could use some sleep themselves!"

"What about Boyd, Ben?" Stevens asked. "You think he's double-crossing us?"

"That depends on whether he found that outlaw loot," Stokes said shortly. "We'll soon find out, and the next play is up to him."

"Let's take the ten thousand and get long gone," Stevens suggested.

"Nobody knows for sure that the James Boys really hid that loot around here!"

"I'll do the thinking for this owl-hoot outfit!" Stokes said harshly. "On top of that, we can take up the offer Dawson made!"

"I'll sell my stock to Ace Fleming and bring you the money myself!"

"You'd give all that for a chance to even up with Terry Boyd?"

"I'd tromp through hell in my bare feet to square up with him!" Dawson said quietly, his teeth were tightly clenched.

"We'll see," Stokes temporized. "I've got a handful of good cards, and I'm going to play them." He turned as Werner led a big gray gelding from the back of the cave, and after Werner had ridden from the cave and down the trail, Cross and Stevens yawned and said the'd turn in and make up their sleep.

"Tie the gal up first!" Stokes barked at Stevens. "Looks like I have to do all the thinking for this outfit!"

Joe Stevens slipped the piggin' string around Connie's wrists, and made his ties. When he had retreated to the darker recesses of the cave, Connie leaned against Jeff and closed her eyes.

"Dad will raise the money," she whispered confidently; "perhaps Stokes will let us ride out together."

Jeff made no reply. The nearness of Connie thrilled him, and brought a measure of comfort to his troubled mind. He had learned a measure of patience far beyond his years, during the time he had spent with old Jim Dawson back in the rugged badlands.

"I've got no claim on that treasure," he said in a low whisper. "If I knew where it was, I'd tell Stokes for the chance to square with Terry Boyd!"

"I've got ears like a bat," Ben Stokes said quietly. "I believe you are telling the truth, Kid!"

Jeff Dawson jerked erect. "So help me Gawd!" he said clearly. "I've no idea where the loot is hidden!"

"You'd never make a tophand owl-hooter, Dawson," Stokes said bluntly. "You stick too close to the truth, and sometimes it don't pay. There's not much honor among thieves, and most of us know it!"

"Take the money and ride on back to Texas," Connie Brighton urged. "I'm sure my father will pay, and Jeff will keep his word about selling his cattle and giving you the money!"

"I'll give it some thinking," Stokes promised. "Now you try and get some sleep, and you better be right about Cole Brighton raising that *dinero*."

8

GOSPEL Cummings awoke as the first fugitive ray of sunlight touched his eyelids. He glanced over at the bunk Jeff Dawson slept in. The bunk was empty, and Cummings slid his feet to the floor and called to Red Stang who was sleeping on a low leather-covered couch. "Rise and shine, Red! The boss hasn't come home yet!"

Red Stang yawned and stretched his long arms over his tousled red head. "You know how it is when a young buck gets to courting," he said carelessly; "Jeff will come dropping in for breakfast."

Cummings stomped into his boots, finished dressing, and started breakfast. During the meal he kept watching the big yard, and after finishing his coffee, he pushed away from the table. "C'mon," he said to Stang. "We're going to ride out to meet Jeff. I've got a feeling!"

Red muttered crossly as he saddled his horse. The two riders left the Triangle D, and Cummings set the pace across the rangeland. It was an hour later when they reached the forks of the trail where the badlands led off to the west, and the Box B to the east.

Gospel Cummings was following the spor left by the horses Dawson and Connie Brighton had ridden. He stared intently when he came to a tangle of hoof-prints, and he stroked

his luxuriant brown beard thoughtfully. "They met up with other riders here. Four of them, and I don't like it none!"

"Some of the boys riding back from the dance," Stang said carelessly. "Jeff ain't going to like it if he knows we were wet-nursing him!"

"Look, I don't trust them Boyds," Cummings said sharply. "They tried to get the Triangle D, and they want that outlaw loot!"

He stared at the trail and rode over to a dead bush. "Look here, Red!" he called. "This is an old Injun trick. Some one bent four branches, and laid a stick down pointing up this trail leading to the lavas!"

Red Stang stared at the sign language, and scratched his red head. He dismounted suddenly, made a dive into the brush. He was holding two forty-five cartridges in his hand when he came out facing Cummings. "What you make of this, Gospel?"

Gospel Cummings stared at the loaded shells. "Jeff and Connie rode back here with them four," he said slowly. "Looks to me like Jeff was trying to tell me something, Red. If he threw those shells away, it means he don't have any way to use 'em!"

"So they must have taken his six-shooter."

"That's it!" Cummings said hoarsely. "Those four must have hidden here and waited for Connie and Jeff. They taken his gun, and he's pointing the trail to the badlands!"

"There's a broken branch yonder," Stang said, and pointed up the trail.

"The Boyds wouldn't take that kind of a chance," Cummings said, and his voice was positive. "You seen any strangers back here recent?"

Red shook his head. "Nary. But that don't mean much; if they didn't want to be seen, they'd stay away from the main trails."

"Let's ride a ways," Cummings grunted. "I want to read the sign, and if Jeff is in trouble, he'll find a way to let me know."

THEY RODE up the trail and into the lava badlands. Cummings pointed to another pair of cartridges just off the trail. "Jeff is a prisoner!" he said harshly. "He's telling me they took his six-shooter!"

He raised his head and listened intently. "Hoss-backer coming this way!" he whispered to Stang. "You take to the brush over yonder to the right; I'll ride in here to the left. Keep your gun handy!"

The minutes ticked away, and then the click of a metal shoe against a rock broke the morning silence. A tall lean man rode down the trail from the badlands, straddling a stout gray gelding. Gospel Cummings stepped his horse into the trail and spoke sharply. "Stand your hoss, stranger!"

Tod Werner dipped his hand down for the gun in his right holster. Gospel Cummings clicked back the hammer of the gun in his own big fist. Werner heard the warning and snugged his pistol back in the leather. "Hold-ups, eh?" he muttered. "Well, I'm traveling light when it comes to cash!"

"Frisk this saddle-tramp, Red!" Cummings barked.

Red Stang rode out of the trail-side brush, circled Werner, and lifted the outlaw's gun from the buscadero holster. Then he slapped Werner for a hide-out pistol, quickly snatched a leather wallet from Werner's left hip pocket. Gospel Cummings widened his eyes.

"That's Jeff's leather," Cummings growled. "What's your handle, feller?"

"Smith. John Smith!"

"Light down off that gray!" Cummings ordered sternly. "You lying so-and-so. Red, you light down too, and frisk this saddle-tramp to the hide!"

"Lay off," Werner said thickly; "are you gents the law in these parts?"

"I'll ask the questions. You rode back here with three other hombres. Shake him down, Red!"

Red Stang pulled a sack of tobacco from Werner's shirt pocket. A paper came out with the tobacco, and Stang read it curiously. His nostrils flared as he passed the note to

Cummings. "They're holding Connie for ransom."

Gospel Cummings took the paper and read the note. His eyes narrowed when he stared at Werner. The outlaw shifted uneasily. Stang was searching another flat wallet. "This hombre is Tod Werner. Tod belongs to the Stokes gang!"

"The Stokes gang? You mean that owlhoot outfit from down Texas way?"

"That's right," Werner admitted; "you do anything to me, and Ben Stokes will kill Dawson and the gal!"

Stang raised his heavy six-shooter. He was standing behind Tod Werner, and he brought the barrel of his weapon down on Werner's skull. He caught the falling man as Werner crumpled, and Cummings frowned his disapproval. "What's the idea?"

"I aim to tie this owlhooter up, and likewise hobble his jaw," Stang said quietly. "That away we won't be bothered with a prisoner. He left a plain trail from where ever he came!"

He took a piggin' string from his saddle and bound Werner's hands behind the outlaw's back. Another short rope trussed up Werner's ankles, and Stang used the blue bandanna neckerchief around the prisoner's throat to make a gag. Then he pulled Werner from the trail into the heavy bracken.

GOSPEL CUMMINGS was scanning the trail, and reading the sign. Red mounted his horse after tying the gray to a mesquite bush where the beans hung thick. Stang glanced at Cummings and pointed up the trail with his chin. "Lead on out, Gospel. I've taken a liking to my new boss, and looks like he needs some help!"

They followed the spoor left by Werner's horse, and after riding for a mile, Cummings reined his sorrel to a stop. "This sign is leading to Lost River Cave, or I'm a Gentle Annie. If Stokes has posted a lookout, we won't have a chance to get in that cave."

"I've been around here a spell," Stang answered thoughtfully. "Seems like I heard a yarn about you finding a secret entrance to that cave."

"That's right," Cummings admitted. "But it might not work again; Stokes might have heard the yarn too."

"He's from Texas, and they couldn't have been here long," Stang reasoned. "Let me ride up the front way, and you circle around and try that old trail."

"It's worth a try, but lightning don't often strike twice in the same place. Don't take any fool chances riding up to the cave from the front. They could pick you off like a sitting duck on a pond!"

"What's the play?" Stang asked curiously. "So we can make it a team!"

"Give me fifteen minutes. I'll crawl down through that chimney. I'll wait 'til I hear you call from the trail down in front of the cave. If we are lucky, I'll take it up from there, and save old Cole Brighton that ten thousand dollars!"

"Get going," Stang said curtly. "Time's a-wasting!"

Cummings nodded and sent his sorrel up a choked deer-trail to the right. He climbed a steep path, tied old Fred to a 'squite bush, and proceeded on foot. Five minutes later he stood beside a pile of rocks with his catch-rope in his hand.

Cummings found a stout branch and fitted it in the hondo of his lass-rope. He climbed into the chimney hole, placed the branch across the opening, and lowered himself cautiously. The oily smell of bats filled the sloping tunnel, and there was the danger of scorpions or snakes in the dank darkness. But Gospel shrugged and lowered himself to the end of the rope.

When his boots touched a rocky shelf, Cummings opened his eyes and turned slowly. He could smell the odor of wood-smoke, and then he saw the glowing coals of a fire not far from his hiding place. He was on a high shelf about eight feet above the floor of the big cave. After his eyes had become accustomed to the gloom, Gospel Cummings looked around carefully.

He stiffened when he saw Jeff

Dawson sitting on the floor about ten yards away, with his back to a limestone pillar. Connie Brighton sat by Dawson's side, her head on the Triangle D cowboy's shoulder.

Cummings slowly drew his six-shooter. Sitting facing the pair, with his back to the cave entrance, a tall burly man was watching Dawson with a six-shooter cradled in his hand. The man's face was covered by a stubble of beard, and Cummings raised his pistol and drew a fine bead on that big right hand.

A minute passed, and then Red Stang's voice called from the trail leading up to the cave entrance. "Hallo the cave. I'm coming up, so don't shoot!"

BEN STOKES leaped to his feet like a cat. Jeff Dawson jerked erect, and Connie Brighton awoke and sat up with a start. As Gospel watched, Red Stang stepped into view at the entrance of the cave.

Gospel Cummings seized the chance to lower himself to the floor of the cave from the shelf. His pistol covered Stokes, and the outlaw had Red Stang under his cocked six-shooter.

"Don't shoot, Stokes!" Stang said quietly. "Or you will be a dead man!"

"Yeah, well just make a pass for your hardware!" Stokes growled. "How'd you get up here?"

"Followed your trail."

"You're a liar! You caught up with Werner, and followed his backtrack!"

"I stand corrected," Stang admitted. "Tell him, Gospel!"

Stokes smiled sneeringly. "Try again, Sonny," he said with a chuckle. "There's another hombre behind me with a cocked gun at my head, and I'm supposed to turn around and look!"

"Drop that gun, Stokes!" Gospel Cummings ordered sternly; "you was right the first time!"

Ben Stokes dropped his gun slowly to the floor. Red filled his own hand as he moved forward. He reached for a hunting knife at the back of his belt, severed the thongs which bound Jeff Dawson, and pushed the gun he had captured from Werner, into Dawson's hand.

Jeff Dawson reached behind Connie Brighton and pulled the slip-knot that held the girl's wrists captive by the piggin' string. "Glad you came, Red. Stay where you are, Gospel!" he warned sharply. "There's two more hiding back deep in the cave!"

"Yeah, and drop that hardware!" a hoarse voice shouted promptly. "Or we'll drill the pair of you!"

"Tell 'em to hold their fire, Stokes," Cummings spoke from the darkness. "If they burn powder, I'll get you sure as sin!"

"Don't get trigger-crazy, you two!" Stokes shouted hastily. "There's another one of 'em, and he's got a cutter on my heart!"

"You do the talking," a voice called from the darkness down the cave. "We can kill these two jaspers and the gal if that other gent gets brash!"

"She's a draw, the way I see it, gents," Stokes said quietly. "You shoot me, and my pards shoot all three of you; then they'll get this other jigger back there in the dark. He will have to come out some time!"

"We'll make a trade," Gospel Cummings offered, "Dawson and the gal rides out with Red, and I'll take my own chances!"

"Keep Dawson and the gal under your guns!" Stokes ordered his two henchmen. "What about the deal you offered me, Dawson?"

"You don't have to deal with him, Jeff!" Cummings shouted. "Its even-steven, or I'll get Stokes first!"

"Then my men will get these other three," Stokes said carelessly. "We've lived a long while on borrowed time nohow; what you say, Dawson?"

"I'll keep my promise," Jeff Dawson answered without hesitation. "That's as far as I'll go!"

"And you'll keep that promise," Stokes said. "You'd make a damn poor owlhooter. Name the time and place!"

"Tonight at twelve, at Hunter's Springs," Dawson said quietly. "I'll ride alone, and you do the same!"

"Suits me," Stokes agreed. "There's just one thing; what about Tod Werner?"

"We'll turn him loose when I ride back from the Springs tonight," Dawson offered. "We ain't any part of the law. You and yours will ride out and quit the country!"

"I don't have a gun on me, and I trust you," Stokes said quietly. "Give me your hand on it, and your pards can ride out without harm!"

"What's this all about, boss?" Red Stang asked. "What for kind of a promise did you make this outlaw ramrod?"

"That's between me and him," Dawson said quietly. "I'm asking you to take orders, Red. It's got to be that way!"

"That's the way it will be," Gospel Cummings interrupted. "I don't know about the deal, but I do know you keep your word."

"Cummings," Stokes said thoughtfully. "Are you that old sinbuster who rods the Devil's Graveyard, by any chance?"

"Not by chance," Cummings answered; "I do it of my own free will."

"You boys back there heard the deal!" Stokes called to his henchmen. "If either of you trigger a slug, you answer personal to me!"

"We heard the deal, Ben," a voice assured the outlaw chief. "Shag on down the trail, you three!"

"What about the law?" Stokes asked Dawson.

JEFF TURNED to Red Stang. "I'm going to ask you and Gospel not to say anything to the Saint until tomorrow morning," he said quietly. "That goes for you too, Connie. Well?"

"I promise," Connie answered quickly.

"That goes for me," the voice of Cummings added.

"That leaves me no choice," Red Stang growled angrily. "You *banditos* have until tomorrow morning to make tracks going away!"

"Then mebbe you will take out after us," Ben Stokes said, and he smiled at the tall redhead.

"I might at that," Stang answered with a shrug.

"Mebbe not, after you talk to your boss. Bear my regards to Terry Boyd when you see him!"

Red Stang jerked up his head. "What do you mean by that?"

"Just what I said," Stokes answered; "you'll earn your pay!"

"He's earned it already," Jeff interrupted. "There's been enough of palaver, and I'm getting out of here; I'll see you tonight, Stokes!"

Dawson put an arm around Connie and walked toward the entrance of the cave. Stokes called quietly. "Your horses are in that little off-set, Dawson. *Hasta la vista.*"

"Till we meet again, at midnight."

He walked to the off-set and led out the horses. Red Stang backed to the cave entrance, holding his gun on Ben Stokes. After a long moment, he stepped outside and behind a tall rock at the cave entrance. He heard Stokes call impatiently. "All right, Cummings. Get to hell out of here!"

When he received no answer, Stang smiled and hurried down the trail where he had left his horse. He mounted and joined Dawson and the girl, speaking softly. "Gospel will join us at the foot of the trail; he went in and out another way!"

They rode down the trail and into the brush. A moment later, Gospel Cummings came down the steep trail sliding old Fred on the old sorrel's tail. "Let's put some distance between us and this place," Cummings said, and took the lead at a fast lope.

When he drew rein and eased the pace, Connie Brighton spoke up. "I remember now, Gospel. You went down that chimney hole; that was dangerous, because every one in the Strip knows about it now!"

"Stokes didn't know about it," Cummings said carelessly. "It worked that one time, but we won't try it again."

"What about this deal you made with Stokes, Boss?"

"He promised to sell his cattle, and turn the money over to Ben Stokes," Connie spoke up quickly.

"You promised that, Jeff?" Gospel Cummings asked.

Jeff Dawson nodded. "Eight thousand dollars," he said quietly; "it's worth it, for what I found out!"

"You don't have to sell your herd, Jeff; you've got four thousand in the bank!"

"You can't sell the Triangle D herd, Jeff," Red Stang protested. "I'd be out of a job again!"

"I'm sorry, Red, but you can get a job on the Circle F," Dawson muttered.

"I've been saving my riding pay," Stang said gruffly. "I've got something over four thousand, if that will buy say a third interest in the Triangle D. I'd like for to be your pard!"

"Better take him up to keep him honest, Jeff," Gospel Cummings suggested. "You will save paying him wages, and have a good working hand besides!"

"I got the cash right on me in a money belt," Stang offered eagerly. "What do you say, Jeff?"

Jeff Dawson looked at Connie, and the pretty girl nodded emphatically. Dawson smiled then, and stuck out his right hand to Stang.

"Press the flesh, partner," he said softly; "you're a third owner of the Triangle D, starting tomorrow morning!"

9

RED STANG RODE into the trail-side brush, and Gospel Cummings explained to Connie and Dawson about Tod Werner. A moment later, Werner rode out with his wrists still bound behind his back. The neckerchief had been removed from his mouth, and the prisoner was working his jaw and tongue to restore circulation.

"We've got to pass the Circle F," Cummings said slowly. "I'd like to leave Werner there until we turn him loose to quit the country."

"The Saint won't like it none," Dawson said.

"What the Saint don't know, won't hurt his conscience."

Tod Werner listened and made no comment. He knew that he was getting a break he did not deserve, and he feared the wrath of Ben Stokes for failing in his mission.

The riders made a slight detour and came to the Box B spread. Old Cole Brighton and his wife came out in the yard when they heard the clop of hoofs. While Connie was talking to her anxious mother, Gospel Cummings explained what had happened to Cole Brighton. The old cattleman stared at Dawson and held out his hand. "You'd do that for my gal-chip?"

Dawson swallowed noisily and appeared embarrassed. Brighton smiled and gripped the cowboy by the hand. "Let me pay that promise money," he said quietly. "It's the least I can do, and I'm better able to pay it than you."

"Thanks, Cole," Dawson found his voice. "But I made a deal and I'd rather do it my way; I've taken Red Stang in as a third owner, and we'll make an outfit out of the Triangle D before long."

Mrs. Brighton put her arms around Jeff Dawson and kissed him. "Thanks for what you did, son," she whispered. "We won't ever forget!"

Jeff held the motherly woman close for a long moment. Then he broke away and mounted his horse. "Remember your promise, Connie," he called to the girl. "I'll see you later, when this thing is all settled."

"Do be careful, Jeff," Connie pleaded. "I'll be waiting!"

The three men rode to the Circle F with their prisoner. Ace Fleming came outside and stared curiously

at Werner. He called to big Charley Bailey and told him to lock Werner up in the supply room.

"The Stokes gang, eh?" Bailey said curiously. "That Ben Stokes is wanted in a dozen states!"

Jeff drew Fleming aside. "I'd like to draw four thousand dollars from the bank, Ace," he told the gambler; "I've got to have it right away!"

"To save time, I'll give it to you from my safe in the house," Fleming offered. "The money is in my name at the bank, so we won't have to bother about it; that leaves you about four hundred."

Gospel Cummings jerked his head for Fleming to come to him. "We've got to do something about Terry Boyd," he said in a low voice, when the dapper gambler had joined him. "He brought those owlhooters in here; paid them with the reward he collected on old Jim Dawson!"

"We'll ride over there tomorrow and have a talk with the Boyds," Fleming suggested. "But first, we better let Jeff finish his deal; it means honor to him, and I'm strong for honor in a yearling!"

Fleming went to the house and returned with the money for Dawson. The three men rode on back to the Triangle D, and once in the comfortable little house, Red Stang pulled off his shirt, removed a money belt, extracted some money from it, and handed the belt to Dawson.

"There's my four thousand, and you better put yours in the belt," he said quietly. "Strap it around your hips for your meeting tonight."

"Thanks, partner. Now I'm going to turn in and get me some sleep, if you gents don't mind."

"You do that," Cummings agreed. "I've got to ride down to Three Points and see that everything is all right. Red can do the chores, and I'll be back late this afternoon."

Cummings stepped into the bedroom. He was wiping his lips with the back of his left hand when he came out, and he continued outside and mounted his sorrel.

Red Stang said he would run water for the saddle-stock, and he went about his work. Jeff Dawson shucked his outer garments and crawled into his bunk. He was soon sound asleep.

AN HOUR LATER, Red Stang left the Triangle D on a fresh horse. He rode across the rangeland toward the Box B fence, and went through the motions of riding fence to make sure against breaks. Once he struck the top strand of tight wire with a fence tool, and rode on to the end of the fence.

On his way back, Stang saw a horse-backer loping toward the new panels of the boundary fence. Terry Boyd came up fast on a lean thoroughbred, and Stang waited until the Box B man came to him.

"What's up?" Boyd asked guardedly.

"Hell's a-frying," Stang said curtly; "you brought a passel of Texas owlhooters up here to the Strip!"

"Says who?"

"The top man," Stang answered. "Gent by the name of Ben Stokes. Ever hear of him?"

"Who hasn't? But he's a damn liar if he says I sent for him!"

"Says you sent him a thousand dollars," Stang continued. "Nohow, him and his gang caught Jeff Dawson and Connie Brighton last night!"

"They did what?"

"Stokes was holding the girl for a ten thousand dollar ransom."

"You said...*was?*" Boyd asked sharply.

Stang nodded his head. "Was is right," he answered. "Like you know, I'm working for the Triangle D, and I fight for the iron that pays me my wages. When Jeff didn't show up for breakfast, Gospel Cummings and I rode down to look for sign."

"So you found it," Boyd filled in. "That old Sin-buster is the best tracker in these parts. Well?"

"You wouldn't know much about honor," Stang said pointedly. "But Jeff Dawson passed his word to Stokes. Jeff agreed to sell his cattle and turn the money over to Stokes. He made the deal to save Connie Brighton, and Jeff always keeps his word!"

"Did he raise the money?"

Stang nodded. "Eight thousand dollars; he's riding out to meet Stokes tonight!"

"Stokes is lying when he said I sent for him," Boyd stated flatly. "Where is this meeting to take place?"

"You're not the law," Stang said quietly; "and we promised not to let the Saint know until tomorrow morning!"

"You mean you are going to let Stokes get away with eight thousand in cash?"

"Jeff gave his word of honor," Stang explained. "I thought you might want to know, but I'd kill the man who bushed Jeff from the brush. Thought you'd like to know that, also!"

"You mean anything personal?"

"Yeah," Stang murmured. "You want to make something out of it?"

"Pass it for now," Terry said with a shrug. "So why are you telling me?"

"It gives you a chance to show which side you are on," Stang answered quietly. "Jeff can't afford to lose eight thousand dollars right now, and he's a neighbor of yours."

"That's right," Boyd agreed quickly. "If I recovered the money and returned it to Dawson, it would look pretty good to the folks in town!"

"That's how I had it figured," Stang agreed. "Jeff is meeting Stokes at Hunter's Springs at twelve tonight!"

"Well, I'll be seeing you around, Red," Boyd said, and turned his horse.

RED STANG watched the Box B man ride away, and then he turned to ride back to the Triangle D ranch house. He was passing a copse of alders when a drawling voice called to him. "Ride into the shade, Red. Mebbe we ought to have a little talk!"

Stang jerked in the saddle when he recognized the voice of Gospel Cummings. The gaunt plainsman stood beside his horse, and his bearded face was grave. He waited for Red to speak.

"I was riding fence," Stang said lamely. "Just happened to meet Terry Boyd, and passed the time of day with him."

"Yeah, what time of day?"

"What do you mean, Gospel?" Stang asked but averted his face.

"You talked quite a spell with Terry Boyd," Cummings accused; "mebbe it ain't none of my business, but he killed your pard's Dad!"

"So you didn't ride down to Three Points; you hid out and then followed me!"

"That's reading sign, Red," Cummings agreed without hesitation. "I wasn't close enough to hear, but you and Terry Boyd had quite a confab. You want to tell me about it?"

"I'd go to hell in my bare feet for Jeff!" Stang declared fiercely. "They called him the *'Lobo's Whelp'*, but he lived it down, and is trying to make good!"

"So what's all that to you?"

"Nothing much I can talk about right now," Stang muttered; "what do you aim to do about it?"

"That depends," Cummings said thoughtfully. "I'd go to hell in my bare feet for Jeff, too. You can't play both ends again the middle up here, Red!"

"I'm playing it straight, Gospel."

"Nuh uh," Cummings contradicted. "Now you take last night at the dance. I was suffering some with frawg in my throat. I left the house and went to my horse on account of I had some cough medicine in my saddle-bags."

Red Stang leaned forward, and his face flushed with guilt. Gospel Cummings watched the tall redhead, and there was a brooding sorrow in the bearded man's brown eyes. "So you was sneaking around again."

"It wasn't me who was sneaking," Cummings corrected; "I was invited to the Circle F dance!"

Red Stang drew a deep breath. "So you saw Terry Boyd ride up to the rail," he muttered. "He didn't stay long!"

"No man can serve two masters,"

Cummings quoted sternly. "Either he will cleave to the one and forsake the other, or vicey versy. Last night I was close enough to hear everything you and Terry Boyd said!"

"And you told Jeff to hire me?" Stang whispered. "Why?"

"That away, we could watch you."

"Why do you think I bought in on the Triangle D?"

The face of Gospel Cummings hardened. "I could think of several reasons. Jeff has no kin, and you just might get the rest of the Triangle D if anything happened to him. You might even get your share of that eight thousand back. And then, there's the outlaw loot hidden some place on the Triangle D!"

RED STANG swore angrily and made a pass for his holstered gun. The right hand of Gospel Cummings swiveled sidewise and came out ready for war. His heavy forty-five six-shooter was eared back and ready to go, before Stang's pistol had cleared leather.

"I could have killed you for that fool move," Cummings said quietly, but his deep voice was harsh with anger he could not control. "Now you stand hitched until I remove temptation from your hand...and from mine!"

He stepped around Stang and emptied the cowboy's holster. Red Stang turned slowly and glared at Cummings. "So now you can tell Jeff."

"Mebbe not," Cummings answered. "You just might have a reason for what you did, and I'd like to know."

"I can't talk now," Stang muttered; "all I can say is that you ain't helping Jeff any with this pious stuff!"

"You're helping Jeff?" Cummings asked. "By tipping off his enemy about Jeff's plans?"

"That's right."

"Let's read sign on this play," Cummings suggested quietly. "Jeff rides out there tonight to keep his word to an outlaw we both know has no idea of honor. You send Terry Boyd out to take that money away from Stokes; one of them is bound to get killed!"

"That's right," Stang agreed quietly.

Gospel Cummings stared at the younger man's face. He wanted to like what he saw, but the evidence was all against Red Stang. Cummings finally shook his head and spoke sternly. "I'm going to turn you over to the law for aiding and abetting a felony!" he said harshly. "I've no other alternative!"

Red Stang stared at the bearded face, glanced at the gun in the hand of Cummings, and shifted his feet. Cummings warned him. "Jump me, and I'll clip your wings!"

Red turned his back and sat down on a fallen log. His red head drooped dejectedly, and Cummings watched with a bewildered espression in his brown eyes. "I'll talk, Gospel," Stang whispered at last. "I'll talk if I have your word of honor not to repeat what I tell you!"

"If it's compounding another felony, don't tell me," Cummings warned; "I'll turn you over to Saint John without turning a hair!"

"Sometimes there ain't much difference between the law and an outlaw," Stang said slowly. "I know men who were peace officers one year, and outlaws the next."

"Were you an outlaw, Red?"

Red Stang shook his head. "I was a Texas Ranger for two years; and I earned my pay."

GOSPEL CUMMINGS nodded his head. "I had that figured," he surprised Stang by saying. "I knew you had ridden behind a lawstar."

"How'd you know that?"

"That day you and Shorty Benson jumped Jeff in town; you made no move for your six-shooter, but Shorty did. And when Shorty got himself shot up, you didn't do anything about it. Like you might have heard, I can read sign some!"

"I saw Terry Boyd down in Texas," Stang confessed; "I turned in my star and decided to take a little trip."

"Did it have anything to do with the outlaw loot?"

Red Stang frowned. "You said you could read sign."

"So it *had* something to do with the loot the James gang hid," Cummings continued. "You ain't riding for the law now!"

"I'm riding on my own. Trying to get me a star and I mean to settle down!"

"Let's look at it this way," Cummings said slowly. "You used to ride behind a star. John Saint John is what law we have here in the Strip; seems to me you'd want to help him some!"

"I do; but I wanted to do it my own way!"

"So far, fair enough, though I don't hold with all your methods," Cummings answered. "Now say Terry Boyd takes that eight thousand away from Ben Stokes. Your next play would be to tip off the Saint so he could arrest Terry Boyd with the goods!"

"The Saint would mess it up!" Stang protested. "Leave the Saint out of it!"

"I don't follow you. I can understand honor, and when a man gives his word. What I can't savvy is all this business of baiting traps for a varmint, when we know both them fellers is of the same breed!"

"I'll make out a paper and give it to you," Stang offered. "If anything happens to me, Jeff Boyd gets my share. I'll likewise sign off any claim to his share of the Triangle D!"

Gospel Cummings sighed. "I spoke some to Ace Fleming about you, Red," he confessed. "Ace won't do anything unless something happens to me."

"Have you thought it all out yet? You going to turn me over to that big deputy?"

Gospel Cummings shook his head. "Nuh uh." He took Stang's six-shooter, seated it in the tall redhead's holster. "I'm going to trust you, Red," Cummings continued. "A smart feller once said: *'To be trusted is to be saved!'* I'm going to let you play out your hand, but I'll be watching you!"

"And you won't say anything to Jeff?"

"I wouldn't dare to. Jeff would ride right over and take it to Terry Boyd before he went to see Ben Stokes. Jeff lives for nothing but to clear up his Dad's name, and to see that justice is done to the man who framed old Jim, and then killed him on a sneak!"

"That's why I'm helping Jeff," Red Stang said quietly. "Let's ride back to the spread and get the chores done."

"You ride on, and I'll catch you up; I want to tighten my saddle."

RED STANG climbed his horse and rode away. Gospel Cummings reached to the right tail of his coat. He brought out a bottle of Three Daisies, removed the cork with his teeth, made a mark on the bottle with his thumb, and...drank down past the mark. "Good weather for snakes," he muttered. "A man never can tell when he'll jump one back here in the bresh!"

He bent his elbow again and took one for the road. The tremble left his brown hands, and Cummings mounted his sorrel and stirred old Fred into a lope with his blunted spurs. He overtook Red Stang, and they rode together to the Triangle D house. "Want to say I'm grateful, Gospel," Stang murmured. "Want to say again that you won't be sorry!"

"I noticed you talking some to Charley Bailey over on the Circle F... Bailey is a good man to have on your side!"

Red Stang turned in the saddle and studied the bearded man's face intently. "Bailey will do to take along," he said quietly. "I was telling him to watch that Tod Werner."

"Heard Charley say one day that you were fast with a cutter, and could call your shots."

"I'm no creeping snail, but I'd hate to have to face you for a powder-smoke showdown," Stang retorted. "The way you wished that old smoke-pole out of leather...

Well, it's a good thing you ain't a killer!"

"Thou shalt not kill!" Cummings said sternly.

10

JEFF DAWSON leaped from his bunk clutching at his holster when Cummings shook the cowboy by a shoulder. Cummings spoke softly. "Let the gun ride, Jeff. It's time for supper."

Dawson yawned and stretched his long arms over his curly head. He stretched to his feet, stomped into his boots, and went outside to the wash bench to lave his face and hands in cold water. He grinned at Red Stang who came up to wash his hands. "Slept like a log, with nothing on my conscience," Jeff said with a chuckle. "Everything is working out fine."

Stang studied his partner's face, trying to determine whether Gospel Cummings had said anything to Dawson. "We're in the cattle business," Stang said heartily; "when this trouble is settled, we can really settle down to it."

They went into the house and sat down at the kitchen table. Cummings had broiled steaks, and the gaunt plainsman was a good cowcamp cook. Salt-rising biscuits with baked spuds, stewed canned tomatoes, and steaming cowboy coffee. The three men ate in silence as is the custom of cowmen.

The meal finished, Red Stang rolled a brown-paper quirly, and thumbed a match to flame. He lighted his smoke, inhaled deeply, and glanced at Gospel Cummings.

"I'd like to make that *pasear* with you tonight, Jeff," Cummings suggested thoughtfully. "Just to keep that owlhooter honest."

Dawson shook his head emphatically. "That would spoil everything," he demurred; "no telling what Ben Stokes would do. This way, he'll take the money and leave the country."

"You hope. A gent like Stokes has no sense of ethics."

Dawson and Cummings went to the front room and found seats on the leather couch. Night closed in, and after a while, Stang joined the two men. They talked of range conditions and market prices until Dawson stretched to his feet and said he'd be saddling his horse.

Cummings stared at Stang and shook his head slightly. Jeff went to the barn and lighted a lantern which hung from a rafter near the box stalls. He saddled his horse, slipped the head-stall over the delicate ears, and led the horse out to the tie-rail.

Stang watched as Jeff took a thirty-thirty rifle from a set of antlers over the front room mantle. Dawson walked outside and pouched the long gun in the saddle-scabbard under the left fender of his worn saddle. Then Dawson came back to the house, reached for a box of cleaning tools, and started to clean his forty-five.

This finished to his satisfaction, Dawson washed his hands, nodded at the two men, and settled the brim of his Stetson down over his gray eyes. "I'll see you two gents before breakfast."

Stang waited until the thud of hoofs had died away in the outer darkness. Then he glanced at Cummings who was lounging comfortably in a corner of the leather couch. "I'd feel better riding out aways. What you say if we gear our tops?"

"Later," Cummings answered. "If we ride out there now, Ben Stokes will get spooky and get ideas; the deal was for them to ride alone."

OUT ON the trail, Jeff Dawson rode through the night. He glanced up at the sky. A sickle moon was just appearing in the east; there wouldn't be too much light. The Triangle D cowboy smiled grimly and patted the stock of his rifle to reassure himself.

It was eight miles to Hunter's Springs which watered a vast expanse of graze on government land. As is natural around a waterhole, the margins of the pool were lined with cottonwoods and alders.

Dawson reached the springs just as the sickle moon rode almost directly overhead. A scud of clouds obscured the moon for a time, and Jeff rode behind a stand of timber to study the lay of the land. "Dawson!" a voice called softly. "I'm waiting over here near this nest of rocks!"

Jeff recognized the voice of Ben Stokes, and his pulses quickened. He waited for a moment until a man rode out from the sheltering rocks. Satisfied that Stokes was alone, Dawson sent his horse forward to meet the outlaw. "Howdy, Stokes; I raised the wind like I said!"

"I knew you would," Stokes answered gruffly; "you brought the money with you?"

"I brought it," Dawson answered, and he pulled out the tails of his shirt. He fumbled at the money belt, unfastened the buckles, and passed the belt to Stokes. "It's all there," he said curtly. "If you're smart, you'll ride out tonight!"

Stokes took the belt and looped it around his saddle-horn. "Good luck with your hunting," he said quietly. "And may your hoss never grow lame!"

"Thanks," Dawson said gruffly. "*Adios*!"

He turned his horse and rode away in the pale moonlight. Ben Stokes watched the broad back, and then he tucked the money-belt down into a saddle-bag behind his cantle. He dismounted for a moment to tighten his cincha, and the burly outlaw stiffened when a voice spoke just behind him, "Elevate, and stand hitched, Stokes!"

Ben turned his head slowly. A tall slender man was covering him with a heavy rifle. The man wore a bandanna mask on the lower part of his face, but Stokes had recognized the muffled voice. "What's the idea, Boyd?"

"The old double-cross. You talked with your big mouth wide open; you told that yearling that I sent for you and your gang!"

"Which you did!" Stokes said slowly. "I made the best deal I could for myself, and you do the same!"

"I aim to," Boyd said bluntly. "Pass that money belt over before I drill a hole through your back, big enough to throw a dog through!"

"I never argue with a gun," Stokes said quietly; "but I reckon you know what that means, Boyd!"

"Reckon I do. You won't leave the country and the law will run you down!"

Ben Stokes took the money belt from his saddle-bag and threw it to Terry Boyd. Boyd caught the belt with his left hand, holding the rifle with his right.

"I'll make you a little bet, Boyd," Stokes said quietly. "I'll bet you my horse against yours, that you don't keep that money long!"

"It's always open season on wolves; you are wanted two thousand dollars worth, in Texas!"

"This ain't Texas. And you ain't the law!"

"Add two thousand to this eight, and it makes ten thousand," Boyd counted out loud. "And you won't be in any condition to talk!"

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning that dead men tell no tales," Boyd explained. "I can read your mind, Stokes. You figure you might as well take a fighting chance; you will make a stab for your belt gun, and I'll shoot in self defense!"

BEN STOKES drew a deep breath and relaxed. "Thanks for telling me," he said in a hoarse whisper. "Go ahead and murder me, you mangy coyote!"

"How do you want it, head or heart?"

"What difference does it make? It's murder either way, on account of we've got witnesses!"

"Hogwash! That one had long white whiskers when I was kicking slats out of my crib!"

"There's two hoss-backers not

more than a hundred yards away," Stokes said quietly; "looks like the Boyd boys to me!"

Terry Boyd jerked a quick glance over his shoulder. He recognized his brothers, and spoke jerkily. "I'm going to give you a chance you don't deserve, Stokes; jump your saddle and get long gone!"

Ben Stokes was an opportunist. He leaped to his horse without wasting time in thanks or argument. His spurs bit into the flanks of his mount, and the outlaw rocketed away toward the lava badlands.

Terry Boyd lined his sights and pressed the trigger. As the rifle barked, Stokes cut his racing horse sharply to the right. A bullet kicked his left shoulder, then the outlaw was gone in a copse of alders.

Terry faced his brothers with the smoking rifle in his hands. Tom dismounted and ground-tied his horse with trailing whangs. "What you up to, Terry? Me and Dix have been keeping tabs on you some!"

"I was helping the law!" Terry Boyd said brazenly. "That was Ben Stokes, and there's a two thousand dollar reward on his head!"

"I hate and despise a damn bounty hunter!" Tom said scathingly. "Now you listen to me, Terry; you might as well drop that rifle, on account of Dix has you under his gun, and the hammer eared back!"

Terry Boyd jerked a glance at Dixon, and snarled angrily as he let his rifle slip to the ground. "What's the idea of throwing down on me?" he shouted. "Are you taking up for a damned outlaw?"

"Stop it!" big Tom said sternly. "I'm taking that belt you've got looped around your left arm. If he gives me trouble, wing him, Dix!"

"Wing him hell! I'll kill the thieving son!" Dix threatened. "He's done nothing but bring us grief ever since he rode down to Texas!"

Tom stepped forward behind his drawn six-shooter, snatched the money belt from Terry, and backed away. Then he spoke sternly. "Now I'm going to give *you* a chance, Terry. The kind you gave Ben Stokes. Fork your bronc and make tracks going away. If you stay here an hour longer, I'll make a report to the law, and you and Stokes can fight it out on even terms; there will be a price on your scalp!"

"You'd turn against your own flesh and blood?"

"From now on, you ain't any kin to me and Dix," Tom Boyd said sternly; "you don't own any part of the 3 B, and this money goes back to its rightful owner!"

"I'll ride, but I'd like to know. How did you find out about the money?"

"You guess," Tom Boyd countered. "There were a lot of people mixed up in this go-around. Cole Brighton knew; also Ace Fleming; not counting Gospel Cummings and Red Stang. You want to kill all them fellers?"

"Red Stang, eh?"

"Mebbe you didn't know," Tom Boyd said quietly; "Stang is now a third owner of the Triangle D!"

"Why, the dirty double-crosser!" Terry ripped out.

"Call yourself names, Terry!" Dix told his brother. "Now you climb your saddle and get to hell long gone. Walk with him to where he left his horse, Tom; he makes a funny move, I'll scotch him like I would any other side-winder!"

Tom Boyd reached out and took Terry's six-shooter. He opened the loading gate, placed the hammer at half cock, spun the cylinder, and ejected the shells. "Just to keep you honest, Terry. I'll take that rifle back with me. Where did you leave your cayuse?"

"Yonder behind that stand of cottonwoods," Terry growled. "I'll square up with you and Dix one of these days!"

"Why don't you change your name?" Tom Boyd suggested. "You ain't no kin of mine any longer, you ring-tailed skunk!"

He saw his brother climb his horse and ride away. Tom Boyd walked back to his own horse and mounted up. He shook his wide

shoulders back and spoke curtly to Dixon.

"Let's hit out for the Triangle D and get this over," he said heavily.

Dix Boyd nodded, and they rode across the range through the pale moonlight. A few minutes later they skirted a heavy stand of cottonwoods, and neither saw a tall horseman who drew his horse into the deeper shadows.

GOSPEL CUMMINGS dismounted and held the nose of his horse to prevent a warning whinny. Red Stang was performing a similar office on his Morgan horse, and when the Boyds were out of sight, Stang spoke in a whisper. "What do you reckon, Gospel? This game is getting all mixed up!"

"Looks to me like they are heading for the Triangle D. "Let's cut across that barranca yonder and see if we can beat them there."

"You reckon Jeff is home by now?"

"He should be. And he will be wondering where we went. Let's burn these critters' hocks, and light a shuck for home!"

The two men rode into a deep barranca which cut over toward the west. When they emerged from the draw, they kept up the pace. Red glanced back over his shoulder. "We're ahead of them; I can see big Tom sky-lined back yonder about a half-mile!"

Gospel Cummings grunted and raced on. They rode into the Triangle D a few minutes later, stabled their horses, and went on to the house.

Jeff Dawson came out and stared at the two men suspiciously. "Where were you two hombres?"

"Just riding around," Cummings answered soothingly; "did you have any trouble?"

"Nary a bit," Dawson answered tartly. "I get it now. You two rannies tailed me and stayed at a distance; you let me pass you, and then rode on back home!"

"That's reading sign, Jeff," Cummings admitted. "Just in case Ben Stokes was pulling a double-cross, we meant to keep him honest."

"I didn't need any help," Dawson growled. He cocked his head and walked to the door. "Hoss-backers coming," he said curtly. "Who could that be at this time of the night?"

Gospel Cummings walked to the door and scanned the horizon. "Looks like Tom Boyd. Him and Dix!"

"I don't want no truck with any of them Boyds!" Jeff Dawson said hotly "they still believe that old Jim stole their damn payroll!"

"It won't hurt none to talk, and we've got them outnumbered. You ain't riding the owlhoot trail any longer, Jeff. You've got to learn to be neighborly."

Jeff growled in his throat, but he walked back into the house. The Boyds dismounted and tied up at the rail. Tom Boyd hailed the house in a loud voice. "Hallo the house! We came peaceful, and we'd like to make a little talk!"

"Come on in, Tom," Gospel Cummings answered. "What in time are you doing out at this time of night?"

"As if you didn't know," Dix Boyd said dryly. "We saw you and Stang cut out of that draw and race on ahead." He turned to Jeff Dawson. "Howdy, Dawson."

"Howdy," Dawson grunted. "We don't want none!"

"None what?" Dix Boyd asked with a frown.

"No truck with the 3 B."

"You might want some," Tom Boyd interrupted.

"I want nothing from you Boyds," Dawson repeated nastily.

"Did you lose any money tonight?" Tom Boyd asked pointedly.

JEFF DAWSON made a slap for his pistol. Gospel Cummings caught that slapping hand and held the gun in the holster. "Quit fighting your head, yearling! Or I'll slap you to sleep with your own gun!"

He jerked away, taking Dawson's gun with him. Big Tom Boyd watched the little scene, and he waited for Dawson to speak.

Jeff turned on Red Stang with a muttered curse. "Now you better talk, you long-jointed red-head!" he said hoarsely. "I rode after you this afternoon when you thought I was sleeping. I saw you through a pair of field glasses. You met Terry Boyd down by the boundary fence. Well?"

Red stared with his mouth open. He glanced at Cummings who was stroking his brown silky beard.

"Yeah, I saw you too, Gospel," Dawson said bitterly. "Now these 3 B hombres ride up here. I was better off out on the owl-hoot trail in the badlands. At least, I had one friend I could trust out there and now he's...dead!"

"Mebbe you better tell him, Gospel; looks like I let out too many coils, and I'm all tangled up in my own rope!"

"Me and Dix is sorry about old Jim," Tom Boyd said softly. "We aimed to take him, I'll admit that. But we had nothing to do with the killing, and you know it better than most!"

"You're sorry!" Dawson said angrily. "You 3 B hombres put old Jim on the outlaw trail. You tried to buy the Triangle D cheap, and we all know why?"

"Nuh uh," Tom Boyd contradicted. "Me and Dix ain't interested in that outlaw loot. That was all Terry's doings, and that's why we rode over here to see you."

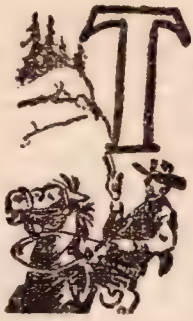
Jeff turned his back, and tried to control his seething anger. He knew the justice of Tom Boyd's statement. Tom and Dixon had been a mile away when Terry Boyd had shot old Jim. He shrugged when Gospel Cummings put a big hand on his shoulder.

"Mend you manners, cowboy," Cummings said sternly. "You can at least listen to Tom's wau-wau!"

"I'm going to square up with them Boyds before I die!"

"And we aim to square up with you before somebody dies," Tom Boyd said quietly.

11



Tom Boyd watched Jeff Dawson turn slowly. Dawson's right hand was hovering above the grips of his gun, but big Tom smiled and slowly shook his head. "Not that way, Jeff," the cattleman said quietly. "I admire your courage, and your sense of honor. You made a deal with an outlaw, and you went through with the deal.

"None of your damn business!"

"No, but it turned into my business," Tom continued. "Dix and I followed our brother Terry tonight. Terry held up Ben Stokes after you left; he took the money belt from Stokes, and he tried to kill that owl-hooter when Stokes made a run on his horse!"

Jeff listened, and his face changed. He turned to face Red Stang, who refused to meet his gaze. Dawson's young face hardened. "So that's what you was telling Terry this afternoon."

"I don't know about that part of it," Tom interrupted. "I said me and Dix was going to try and square up with you; we took that money away from Terry at the point of a gun, so we brought it back to you!"

The change that swept over young Jeff Dawson was startling. "You brought back the money?" he asked in a husky whisper. "The eight thousand dollars?"

"You can't do business with an outlaw, Jeff," Tom Boyd said vehemently, "no matter what name he goes by; it's your money!"

Tom Boyd thrust the money belt in Dawson's hand, and the Triangle D cowboy took the belt because he didn't know what else to do. He looked down at the belt, glanced at Gospel Cummings, and then stared hard at Red Stang.

Gospel watched in silence, and for once he was at a loss for words. He told himself that it would take some thinking.

Red stared at the toes of his scuffed boots. He started to speak, changed his mind, and struggled with his problem. Jeff watched Stang and said: "Well?"

"I feel sick," Stang muttered. "I'm as clean as new snow, Jeff. If I take my four thousand, it looks like I'm guilty. I can't get a riding job around here now. I'd have to ride out, and it would look like I was joining Ben Stokes or Terry Boyd!"

"Yeah," Dawson muttered dryly. "And it's not very pleasant back there in the badlands; I ought to know!"

"So?"

"So you get to hell away from me and the Triangle D!" Jeff Dawson said fiercely. He tossed the money belt to Gospel Cummings. "Take my four thousand out and give Stang the belt and his money," he told the gaunt plainsman.

Gospel took the belt and opened a flap. He counted out paper money while the rest watched silently. Cummings handed the belt to Red Stang, and passed the other money to Dawson. "Where you going, Red?"

Stang shrugged his left shoulder dejectedly. "I'll sleep with the owls," he said bitterly; "looks like I played my cards all wrong!"

"There is a Destiny that shapes our ends, rough-hew them as we will," Cummings quoted soberly. "Looks like you didn't have any control over circumstances, Red. Not any more than Jim Dawson and Jeff had when the 3 B payroll was stolen."

"That made me the Lobo's Gun-Whelp," Dawson said sullenly.

"Dix and I are sorry about that," Tom spoke up earnestly. "We know now that old Jim never did that job. That scheme was hatched out closer to home."

"I might as well tell you, Boyd," Dawson said quietly. "Terry killed my Dad on a sneak, and I took an earnest to square up for old Jim!"

"Know how you feel, Jeff," Tom Boyd murmured. "It's between you and Terry. Be careful; he's tricky as a coon!"

"A man can't do his best fighting when he's wrong," Dawson said emphatically. "Terry Boyd knows he is wrong!"

Gospel Cummings quickly changed the subject. "Ride home with me and stay a few days, Red," he said to Stang. "I've an extra bunk, and grub enough for simple living."

"Thanks, Gospel," Stang accepted the invitation gratefully. "It will give me time to untrack my mind."

"Hoss-backer coming," Dix Boyd said suddenly. "You reckon who could that be?"

Gospel Cummings listened and stroked his silky beard. "The law is riding in, gents," he announced. "That's John Saint John, and don't give your right names!"

RED STARED at Cummings who was watching the door. A horse loped into the yard, slid to a stop at the rail, and heavy boots thudded to the ground. Spurs dragged toward the house, and then Saint John entered the room without knocking. "I got here in time!" the big deputy said with a sigh. "What you Boyds doing over here, Tom?"

"Trying to right a wrong," Tom answered without hesitation.

"I ought to wrap the jail around you, Jeff!" Saint John barked savagely. "For aiding and abetting a wanted criminal to escape!"

"I helped no criminal to escape. You're whistling past the graveyard!"

"Many a true word is spoken in jest," Saint John agreed. "And that's where you are apt to wind up, taking the law in your own hands!"

"I had a hand in it," Red Stang spoke up; "I was pards with Jeff for a time."

"Consider yourself under arrest!" the deputy barked. "Both you and Dawson!"

"Did any one sign a complaint?" Gospel Cummings asked.

"Don't need any when a pair of hombres compound a felony."

"Look, Saint," Cummings continued. "You don't have any witness-

es, and a man does not have to testify against himself. Where does that leave you?"

"Up Coon Creek in a leaky boat, and no oars," Tom Boyd said dryly.

The deputy turned on Boyd furiously. "The same charge goes for you!" he shouted; "you allowed Terry Dixon to commit a holdup, and you let him ride away!"

"Prove it!"

"I *can* prove it!" Saint John blustered; "I caught Terry, and he talked!"

"You've got Terry in jail?"

Saint John flushed and lowered his eyes. "I had him in jail, and I'll have him there again!"

"You mean he got away?" Cummings asked.

"Pulled a hide-out gun on me," the big deputy admitted viciously; "I'm getting up a posse come daylight!"

"Don't look at me," Cummings told Saint John; "I'm no part of the law!"

"Count me out," Red added; "I'm under suspicion."

"Here's a chance made to order for you, Jeff," Saint John said to Dawson. "Terry Boyd killed old Jim, your Dad!"

"You said I was under arrest," Dawson told the big deputy. "I wouldn't ride with a law-pack noways!"

"You'll ride if I say so!"

"Say so, and see where it gets you," Dawson said quietly. "Any hunting I do, will be on my own!"

"You can't take the law into your own hands!"

"Terry took the law in his hands; and you told me it was always open season on wolves!"

Tom Boyd nodded at his brother and started for the door. "You wouldn't hardly expect me to ride in your posse now," he said quietly. "We're making tracks back to the 3 B!"

"I'll get Terry!" Saint John promised. "I'll subpoena you two Boyds, and you'll tell the truth under oath!"

"We'll be seeing you around," Tom said, and walked from the room, followed by his brother Dixon.

"Well, we might as well be riding, Red," Cummings said to Stang.

"Stay here on the Triangle D tonight," Dawson suggested; "it's mighty late to be riding, and we can all sleep here just as well."

THE BOYDS rode out of the yard, and Saint John scratched his square jaw. "I've got a plan," he said slowly. "It's past two o'clock now; it will be light shortly after five. Gospel is the best tracker and sign-reader in the country, and we can pick up the trail at daylight. I'll get some sleep in that big chair yonder."

"Rest yourself, and welcome," Dawson said ungraciously. "But count me out of your posse."

"You'll ride if I tell you to ride!"

"Tell me, and then sit on your hands."

"You never learn, do you, Saint?" Cummings asked wearily. "For years you've been a-pawing and a-bellering every time you wanted a posse. You get all hands riled up, but you just never do learn any better."

Saint John flushed and shook his head. "It's made to order," he muttered. "Jeff was back there in the badlands for three years. Terry Boyd killed his old man. You, Gospel; you know every canyon and draw back there in the lavas. Stang has been a Texas Ranger. We can't miss!"

Jeff turned quickly. He stared at Red Stang, who stared back defiantly. "You never told me you rode behind a law-star," Dawson said slowly. "I'm beginning to understand some things now!"

"Such as what?"

"Such as you throwing in with Terry Boyd," Jeff answered quietly. "It all fits into a pattern. The James Boys were run out of Texas and Oklahoma. They came up here and buried some loot. You shuck your law-star and ride up here; you make a deal with Terry Boyd who has been hunting for the loot!"

Gospel Cummings appeared thoughtful. He too, was putting some pieces of the puzzle into place. He remembered the conversation he had overheard between Red Stang and

Terry Boyd at the Circle F dance. "That wasn't the reason I quit the Rangers."

"What was the reason?" Saint John demanded.

"None of your damn business!"

"I'm making it my business! I can write to Austin and get your record!"

"It's a free country, and you're the law," Stang answered carelessly; "fly at it, law-dog!"

Gospel Cummings stared thoughtfully at the deputy, and finally made a suggestion. "Being the law, you're wasting your time here, Saint. Seems to me you'd ride over to the 3 B and watch for Terry Boyd. He's bound to go back there for supplies, or mebbe a bed-roll."

Saint John tightened his jaw. "Good idea," he assented. "I'll get right over there after breakfast. "You gents can ride along with me, just in case."

Gospel sighed. He glanced at the two younger men, nodded his head, and sat down to tug off his high-heeled boots. "I'm going to get some shut-eye," he said heavily. "It won't take long to spend the night here, and you jaspers can suit yourselves."

"Count me out of the posse," Red Stang said firmly.

Jeff Dawson said: "Likewise!"

"We'll see," Saint John growled, and sat down in a big cowhide chair to pull off his heavy boots.

JEFF DAWSON jerked his head at a bunk and looked at Stang. Then he blew down the chimney of the coal-oil lamp, removed his outer garments and boots, and crawled into his bunk.

"Gospel!" he called in a whisper. "Gospel Cummings!"

"Yeah, Jeff," the plainsman answered calmly. "You've been thinking too?"

"What about Tod Werner?" Dawson whispered; "Bailey was holding him on the Circle F!"

"I reckon he's still holding him," Cummings answered; "we never did ride over to give him the word."

"What about Werner?" Saint John asked sharply.

"Hell!" Red Stang exploded, and he got to his feet and flicked a match to flame with a thumb-nail. "Looks like a man won't get any sleep on this spread tonight; I'm going to start breakfast!"

"Call me when it's ready," Saint John grunted, and turned his back to the light.

He was soon snoring loudly, and Cummings pulled on his worn gray pants. Jeff dressed and stomped into his scuffed boots. He jerked his head toward the kitchen and went outside.

Gospel Cummings came out and stepped aside for a moment. Dawson could hear a musical gurgle as Cummings sought solace from his bottle. Cummings stoppered the flask and said: "Well, Jeff?"

"Let's get shut of the Saint," Dawson whispered. "I've been thinking; putting one and two together."

"You get the answer?"

"I think so. I'm sure enough to take a chance. After the law rides off, the three of us can take a little ride on our own."

"You including Red?"

"That's right; I'm not sure what it is, but Red has a score of his own to settle. It has something to do with that buried loot, and leastways, we can watch him. What do you think?"

"You've been reading my mind, Jeff," Cummings answered promptly. "Red Stang had some definite purpose in coming up here, and I'm curious."

"Yeah, I've got a reason," a voice said, and Red stepped from the kitchen door.

"I know part of the reason," Dawson said quietly.

"Name it!"

Gospel Cummings gripped each of the younger men by an arm. "Bridle your jaws!" he whispered hoarsely. "The Saint is awake, and he's listening; you don't hear him snoring any more!"

"Ears like a bat," Dawson muttered; "I hadn't noticed."

"Pass it till the law rides on. A cowboy can make up his sleep in the winter."

"What's the palaver about?" a loud voice asked crossly. "And the coffee pot is boiling all over the stove!"

Gospel Cummings rushed back to the kitchen and salvaged the blackened pot. He muttered to express his disgust, dumped the grounds into a trash pile, and said he'd get breakfast.

JOHN SAINT JOHN pulled on his britches and stomped into his boots. He glared suspiciously at Cummings who ignored him. "I'd like to know what was all th' whispering about?"

"None of your business; that's why we were whispering," Cummings answered testily. "No one could sleep with you snoring like a saw-mill, so we decided to make some cowboy coffee and sit out your nap!"

"My snoring didn't bother me, but that talk behind my back did!"

"Do you remember the time you were shot up, and came down to Three Points to impose on my hospitality?" Cummings asked pointedly. "While you were healing up your piddling hurts?"

"That was the first and the last time... Begrudging an old friend a place to rest, and a few crusts of bread! You got an extra drink to brace a man up?"

"Look, Saint," Cummings answered sharply. "They sell this stuff at the Casino in Vaca town." He passed over the nearly-empty bottle grudgingly.

Saint John took the bottle and emptied it, as Cummings knew he would. "Builds a man up where he's all tore down," the deputy remarked with satisfaction. "That Three Daisies ain't bad medicine."

"You going to retire soon?"

"Hell no; why do you ask?"

"Thought mebbe you was saving your money against your old age," Cummings answered sarcastically.

"Well, you know how it is, Gospel. Being the law, I can't carry whiskey around with me. It wouldn't look right."

"Yeah, and it's expensive too."

"What's this about Tod Werner?" Saint John asked curiously.

Gospel Cummings turned his head to hide the smile of satisfaction which wreathed his bearded face. "Werner is one of the Stokes gang," he answered. "Bailey was to turn Werner loose after Jeff paid that money over to Ben Stokes."

"That changes my plans some," Saint John said with a smile. "A bird in the hand is worth two in the brush. I'll ride over to the Circle F and put the bracelets on Werner!"

Gospel Cummings turned, and he tried to express chagrin. "Talking with my big mouth wide open!" he muttered. "You said you was going to the 3 B!"

12

GOSPEL CUMMINGS served up breakfast, and yelled for his companions to: "Come and git it!" A cowboy cook might lack in variety, but he always serves wholesome food, and plenty of it. Steaks with fried eggs, heaps of bread and butter, steaming coffee, and stacks of flannel cakes with black-strap syrup.

Saint John was the last to finish. He wiped his walrus mustache with a big hand, wiped that hand on the seam of his pants, and twitched his heavy six-shooter free from hang. "We'll saddle our broncs and ride to the Circle F," he announced in his usual domineering tone.

"Correction," Gospel Cummings said. "The law will ride to the Circle F by his lonesome. You'll find me and Red down at Three Points if you want us; Jeff will be busy on the Triangle D".

"There will come a day," Saint John promised omniously; "a day when you law-dodgers will need a mite of help!"

"So when that day comes, us law-dodgers will help each other, like we always do. You're going to be

busy, so don't let us keep you from your work."

Jeff had little to say. He avoided looking directly at Red Stang, and the lanky redhead seemed strangely subdued. Saint John saddled his horse and rode away, and Cummings nodded at Stang and went out to the barn.

Dawson cleaned up the kitchen and sat down to study the note he and Cummings had found pinned to the kitchen door the day they had buried old Jim Dawson. Dawson compared it with the ransom note Werner had started to carry to Cole Brighton. He shook his head; the writing was not the same.

Cummings and Stang rode out from the barn and called to Jeff. "Be seeing you around," Cummings said casually. "If you need any help, just whistle for me and Red."

"And I'll come on a fast hoss, Jeff," Red Stang said huskily. "On my honor!"

"Thanks," Dawson muttered, and he watched the two ride away. Now he was alone on the Triangle D, and he suddenly missed old Jim. Moisture appeared in his blue eyes, but he knuckled the moisture away with a fist, and went to saddle his horse. Something was drawing him to the Circle C, and five minutes later he rode out of the yard at a fast lope.

A new maturity had come to Jeff since the death of his father. Any man who dodges the law, learns some measure of fatalism, a quality which most cowboys come by naturally. Most of them believe that a man does not die until his time comes, and when it does, there is little he can do about it.

Dawson knew that he had two implacable enemies. Ben Stokes would want the money, and Terry Boyd knew that every man in the Strip would be riding gun-sign on him; both would blame Jeff for their present conditions.

Dawson rode into the Circle F yard an hour later. He saw Saint John's big horse tied at the rail, and then the deputy came out of the tack-room with Charley Bailey. Saint John was evidently angry, and the Circle F cowboy was in no better mood. "You should have watched him close!" Saint John was telling Bailey. "You were assigned to guard Werner, but you had to make up your sleep!"

"Take a half-hitch in that loose jaw of yours!" Bailey answered sullenly. "I take my orders from Ace Fleming; he told me to lock Werner up, and then to hit my bunk!"

Both men saw Jeff ride to the rail and dismount. Saint John bellowed across the yard to Jeff to come a-running, but Dawson squared his jaw and took his time. "What's all the paw-and-beller about?"

"Tod Werner was killed during the night," Saint John growled. "Somebody pried the lock off the tack room door, and sank a knife into that owlhooter up to the hilt!"

"He leave any sign, this killer?"

"Yeah," Bailey answered. "He left the knife in Werner's heart; you ever see the knife before?"

JEFF STEPPED into the tack room. Tod Werner was lying on his back in a pool of dried blood. A bone-handled hunting knife could be seen in the outlaw's left breast. Dawson stared, and caught his breath sharply. "That's Ben Stokes' knife," he said positively. "I saw it at the back of his belt when he was holding Connie and me in Lost River Cave!"

"So that puts the blame on Stokes," Saint John said; his big right hand went down to fondle his six-shooter.

"Not necessarily," Charley Bailey contradicted. "Somebody could have taken Stokes' knife to frame him!"

Saint John turned to face Bailey. "Are you holding up for Stokes?"

"I'm reading sign the way I see it. Don't forget that old Jim Dawson hid out for three years for something he never did!"

Ace Fleming came from the big house and joined the three men. The little gambler listened for a moment, and then spoke quietly to Saint John.

"Better take the body to town, Saint," he suggested. "We'll help you tie Werner to his horse, and

you'll want to make a report to the Coroner!"

"I'll give the orders on law business! If Bailey had watched this hombre, he'd be alive now!"

"When did you first hear about Werner being here?" Fleming asked.

"Last night, on the Triangle D."

"Why didn't you ride over and get him?" Fleming asked.

"Dead of night."

"So you made up your sleep first," Bailey accused; "you make a fine figger-head for the law in these parts!"

"Are you telling me how to do my work?"

"Yeah," Bailey answered. "You want to do something about it?"

"That will do, Charley," Fleming interrupted. "I'll give the orders on the Circle F, and pay no mind to the Saint. Bring up Werner's horse, and we'll give the law that much of a hand."

"I'd like to deputize a posse among your crew," Saint John said arrogantly. "To ride down Ben Stokes."

Fleming shook his head stubbornly. "Get up a posse in town; my boys work for me; they'd have signed up with the law if they had wanted to hunt down killers!"

"Howdy, Ace," Jeff greeted the Circle F owner. "Might as well tell you now. I fell out with Red Stang last night."

He briefly sketched the happenings of the previous night, and Fleming listened attentively. Charley Bailey also listened in, and Saint John flushed with anger and embarrassment.

"Red Stang had no part of that hold-up," Bailey said slowly; "I knew Red down in Texas when he was a Ranger. Square as a die, and he don't fear the devil!"

"You Texans hang together, don't you?" Saint John asked.

Bailey flushed and knotted his big fists. "We do, so remember the Alamo."

"Mebbe you was a Ranger too," Saint John said.

"Mebbe I was!"

"Was you?"

"Write Austin and find out for yourself!" Bailey snapped; "for a gent who needs as much help as you do, you take a mighty poor way of getting any of the same!"

"I don't need any help!"

"Then take this corpse back to town and start tracking down the killer," Bailey suggested. He walked away with his head high, dragging his spurs to tell of his anger. Fleming looked at Saint John and smiled.

"Are you happy now, Saint?"

"I feel all right. Why?"

"Because you never seem to have a good time unless you are riling every one up you meet."

"You too, eh?" the deputy growled.

"Yes; me too!" Fleming answered emphatically. "Think it over, Saint; when you change your mind about riding rough-shod over the people you want to help you, ride out and see me again!"

CHARLEY BAILEY led the dead outlaw's horse to the tack-room door. He threw the split reins to the ground, and indicated the body with a thrust of his chin. "There's his horse, all saddled, and ready to go; put your load on the saddle and make your ties!"

"Head and heels," Saint John grunted, and leaned down to take the dead man's boots.

Bailey turned his back and walked away. "Come back here!" the deputy shouted. "Take him by the shoulders!"

Charley Bailey shrugged and did not turn his head. Neither did he stop walking, and Saint John started after him. Ace Fleming grabbed the big law-man by an arm. "Better leave Bailey alone," he warned. "I'd bet money he could whip you, and Bailey works for me; not for you!"

"I'll lend you a hand, Saint," Dawson offered. "I'll take the boots!"

Saint John scowled and took the dead man's shoulders. Dawson grinned and winked at Fleming.

"Messy damn job," the deputy complained. "I've ruined a shirt!"

"You get paid for it," Fleming said with a smile; "we will see you later in town."

Saint John tied the dead man's

ankles and wrists, mounted his horse, and rode out of the yard leading the pack-horse. Fleming turned to Dawson with his brows raised questioningly.

"Could you spare Charley Bailey Ace?" Dawson asked hopefully. "He's older than me; he's a good hand, and I want to run down some sign on that outlaw loot."

"Ask Charley, and it's fine with me," Fleming agreed. "Hey, Charley!"

Bailey came back slowly to the tack room. His face showed his resentment of Saint John, but the scowl left his face when Fleming spoke. "Jeff asked if you could ride with him today, Charley," the little gambler began. "He wants to run down a lead on that outlaw loot on the Traingle D."

Bailey tried to hide his excitement and failed. "I'll be glad to ride with Jeff, if it's jake with you, boss," he told Fleming. "I've heard so much about the James boys and their treasure, and I'd like to know if any of it was true!"

"Saddle your tops and ride on out," Fleming said quietly. "Stay with Jeff as long as he wants your help."

Charley Bailey almost ran to the big barn. He rode out five minutes later on a chunky grulla horse; his own personal mount.

"Thanks, Ace, and we'll be seeing you." Dawson said.

THE TWO men rode out of the yard and quartered toward the east. Charley Bailey was a bit taller than Dawson, six-feet-two, and would weigh close to two hundred pounds. His age appeared to be about twenty-five, but he had that maturity which come early to men who spend their lives in the saddle. "What's on your mind, Jeff?"

"I'm mixed up, Charley. I like Red Stang, but I can't figure where he rightly fits in."

"He was a law-dog," Bailey said quietly; "he will always think like a peace officer."

"He had a deal with Terry Boyd," Dawson said flatly. "He was playing both ends against the middle!"

"I'd say Red was a square-shooter," Bailey said thoughtfully. "Funny thing down in Texas say twenty years ago, Jeff. There was sometimes very little difference between a lawman and an outlaw; fact is, he might have been an officer in Texas and wanted up in Kansas or in the Nations."

"You mean Red might have been on the dodge?"

"Down Texas way, you don't ask a man too many personal questions," Bailey answered slowly. "As far as that goes, would it matter to you?"

"I'd give it a lot of thought."

"After being on the dodge three years yourself?"

"I see what you mean," Dawson admitted; "but I'm sure that Stang told Terry Boyd about my meeting with Ben Stokes!"

"If he did, he must have had some reason of his own," Bailey murmured. "Where we riding?"

"There's a pair of low hills back near the lavas on Triangle D range," Dawson explained. "I know there was a cave there, and it was covered up by a slide; it's one of the few places Terry Boyd didn't look, and I'm curious."

"If that's the place, it would mean a black-powder job."

They were now on Triangle D range, and Dawson pointed the lead toward a pair of jutting ridges in the low foothills. The hoofs of the two horses made little noise in the thick bunch grass, and they entered a long grassy draw in single file. Jeff Dawson reined to a sudden stop as he held up his left hand. "Somebody up ahead! I saw a Stetson top that hog-back yonder!"

Bailey's right hand dropped to his holster to loosen his six-shooter against riding crimp. He had seen nothing, but then, he realized that Jeff Dawson had been on the dodge for three long years. "We better leave the horses here and press on the rest of the way afoot. You got any idea who it might be?"

"Could be Terry Boyd," Dawson answered through clenched teeth.

Bailey caught Dawson by the arm.

"If it is, don't go to fighting your head like a green yearling," he cautioned. "If we are going to learn anything about this puzzle, we want to listen a lot, and keep our mouths shut. You understand, Jeff?"

Dawson was rubbing the grips of his gun. His breath was coming fast but he grew quiet under the restraining influence of his older companion. He nodded his curly head.

Bailey now took the lead, and the two men crept through the barranca without making a sound. Five minutes later, Bailey stopped and raised a hand for increased caution. A horse was tethered to a 'squite bush, and both men recognized the 3 B brand on the left hip.

They crouched low and made their way to a stand of creosote bushes which blocked the far entrance to the draw. Both men froze to immobility when they saw a slender man about fifty feet away, with his back to them. "Terry Boyd!" Dawson whispered softly.

BOYD WAS also crouching behind a bushy cover, and he was evidently watching some one else. The sounds of digging became perceptible, and Boyd straightened up with a six-shooter in his right hand. He stepped into the clear, his voice giving the familiar stick-up command. "Stand hitched, and sky them dew-claws!"

Bailey scudded across the clearing like a frightened deer, with Dawson at his heels; they stopped behind the cover vacated by Terry Boyd.

Boyd had the drop on a tall burly man who obediently raised both hands above his head. His face was covered with a stubble of beard, but Dawson recognized him instantly.

"That's Ben Stokes," he whispered; "he didn't quit the country after all!"

"Howdy, Boyd," the outlaw greeted; I heard the Saint had wrapped the calabozo around you."

"Mebbe you had something to do with me going to jail," Boyd accused nastily. "What you looking for back here?"

"Treasure," Stokes answered, with no attempt at evasion. "Old Fred Haney said he helped plant the loot and Haney wasn't given to stretching the truth like you and me!"

"Speak for yourself, you damn owlhooter! You told Dawson I had sent you a thousand to come up here!"

"A trace, you might say. But it's a job for black powder. You want to pard with me again?"

"Why should I?"

"We're both straddling the owlhoot now," Stokes reminded.

"So it's dog eat dog. Where you want it, head or heart?"

"You mean to stand there with your cutter in your hand, eared back to go, and shoot me down like a dog?"

"Like a damn lobo," Boyd corrected. "You double-crossed me once, but you won't get another chance!"

"I should have quit when I was ahead," Stokes said glumly. "Tell you what, Boyd; you stuck me up the other night and took my traveling stake. Not that it did you any good; your brothers trimmed your horns down to the nubs. Are you holding anything?"

"Sixes full! Is that good enough?"

"Nuh uh," Stokes said quietly. "You tried to kill me after giving me the sign to high-tail. You holding any cash?"

"I've got three thousand rat-holed away; keep on talking."

"I've got two thousand," Stokes said slowly. "Not on me," he added quickly. "I'll ante that two thousand for the chance to match cutters with you, winner take all!"

"How long will it take you to dig it up?"

"I could be back in an hour," Stokes answered. "You?"

"That's time enough for me," Boyd growled; "I've got you faded and we both know it!"

Charley Bailey touched Dawson's arm and began a retreat. They reached their horses and rode up another draw, and Jeff Dawson showed his bewilderment.

"When they get the money, we'll step in and take them both for the law," Bailey whispered.

"They'll cross each other up," Dawson argued.

Charley Bailey shook his head. "This thing is bigger than money; bigger than life to either one of those buscaderos," he explained. "It's what you might call killer's pride. Each thinks he is faster with his tools than the other. This one they will play above the board!"

13

RED Stang stopped his horse on the trail-forks leading to the Circle F on the east, to Three Points on the south. Gospel Cummings watched the tall redhead, but made no comment. Stang finally spoke jerkily. "I'm riding out aways, Gospel, just to have a look-see."

"I'll ride along. Do you mind?"

"I was hoping you'd come," Stang admitted. "There's a place back on Triangle D range I've been wanting to look at closer."

"You're thinking about that outlaw loot; I'll bet it's a spot between two low hills."

"How'd you know?"

Cummings smiled. "The loot is buried between two hills," he said quietly. "Why are you so interested in that old treasure?"

"Who isn't? Right now that loot belongs in the Public Domain. It will belong to who ever finds it."

"Not if it is on private property," Cummings argued; "and the Triangle D belongs to Jeff Dawson."

"I'd like to see Jeff get it," Stang said earnestly. "They called him 'The Lobo's Whelp', and he deserves something for the misery they dealt him and his Dad!"

"Where do you fit in?"

"I'd like to see Terry Boyd get his needings," Stang muttered.

"He do something to you?"

"Yeah!" Stang growled. "He did something to me!"

Gospel Cummings sighed. He knew cowboys and their moods, their code of ethics, and their stubborness. Red Stang had said all he intended to say, and what he had said was worth some thinking about.

"Let's ride then; looks like no one in these parts will get any rest until that treasure is found."

Five miles and forty minutes later, Gospel Cummings reined his sorrel into the brush, followed closely by Stang. Cummings was staring thoughtfully across a grassy swale where a little hillock gave promise of cover. "Easy now," he warned Stang. "I don't know what for, but Jeff Dawson is behind that little hill!"

He rode his horse deeper into the brush when the clop of hooves warned of an approaching rider. Red made a little slap for his belt-gun when Terry Boyd rode up the trail at a trot, and Cummings reached out and gripped Stang's right arm. "Hold it, you young fire-brand! Jeff is watching Boyd for some reason, and Jeff isn't alone. Charley Bailey is with him!"

They waited until Boyd was out of sight, and Cummings again took the lead and rode back to the trail. He met Bailey, who showed surprise and disappointment at the meeting, but Jeff greeted Cummings cordially.

"All we need now is the Saint," Bailey said with a grim smile. "Boyd and Stokes have a meet for a powder smoke showdown, and the law could take the winner!"

Bailey explained his remarks, and Cummings stroked his silky beard. Dawson and Stang looked each other over doubtfully; neither spoke to the other.

"Them two will talk some more," Bailey said confidently; "we might learn a lot by listening!"

"One of them will quit doing what he's been doing," Cummings said slowly; "those two will play for keeps!"

"Save the law a lot of time and money," Bailey said with a shrug. "We will leave the horses here and shag ahead on foot."

"Fan out when we get to those two little hills," Cummings suggest-

ed. "That will thin any target we make, and we will have them surrounded on three sides."

THE HORSES were tied up in a thicket of mesquite well off the game trail. Charley took the lead and started through the head-high brush, his pistol in his big right hand. Jeff Dawson followed Bailey, with Cummings at his heels. Red Stang was left to bring up the drag, and he was glad that he did not have to face Dawson.

After a time, Charley raised a hand for caution. They were now moving slowly through the bunch grass, and Bailey motioned for Dawson and Cummings to fan out, one on either side. Stang went to the right, and none of the four made a sound as they carefully spaced their boots to avoid crackling twigs.

Jeff Dawson came to a little hillock surrounded by sage and creosote bush. He hunkered down and peered through the foliage. No one was in the clearing, but Dawson saw the tops of the brush move over to the left. Then he heard Terry Boyd's voice. "I see where you are holed in, Stokes. Step out like a man!"

Ben Stokes stepped promptly into the clear. His wide shoulders were hunched forward as though he half expected a bush-whack shot. He nodded approval when Terry Boyd also stepped into the open.

"Did you bring your ante?" Boyd asked.

"I brought it. You?"

"Got it on me," Boyd answered. "If you are lucky, you can take it off my body!"

"Great minds run in the same channel," Stokes said with a cold smile. "I never did like you none Boyd; you just ain't what a hand might call honest."

"What do you know about honesty? You've been robbing and killing since before you rubbed the velvet off your horns!"

"Honest robbing," Stokes defended. "Everybody and his blind old step-pappy knew I was an outlaw. You tried to play both ends of the game; you let on to be respectable, and you even robbed your brothers!"

Jeff Dawson listened, and wondered about Red Stang. Would Red be able to control himself, or would the former Texas Ranger spoil the play and precipitate an impending shoot-out?

"I've got a surprise for you," Stokes said quietly. "I found out who those three jaspers were who nearly beat old Fred Haney to death!"

"Mouthy son, ain't you?" Boyd sneered. "That away, you figure to live a little longer?"

"You and me both have lots of time; just wanted you to know before I drill a hole through your black heart!"

"Those three?" Boyd asked lazily.

"Tod Werner was one; Joe Stevens was another."

"That's two of your own gang," Boyd tallied. "This third hombre; was it Ad Cross, that other owl-hooter who runs in your pack of trail-wolves?"

"Nug uh," Stokes said, with a shake of his head. "This third feller always throws his shots off a mite high; he's the one who shot old Fred!"

Jeff Dawson leaned forward, his nostrils flaring wide. The same man who had shot old Fred Haney, had also shot Jim Dawson. Both had lived for several hours after being shot high above the heart.

Dawson drew his six-shooter and lined his sights on Terry's back, between the shoulders. His finger tightened on the trigger, then Dawson sighed and lowered his gun. He had promised Bailey to listen.

"So it could have been you who shot Haney," Boyd said nastily.

"I never throw my shots off; I put my slugs where I call 'em. Give you one more guess, you killing bush-whacker!"

Jeff Dawson gasped slightly when two heads appeared above the brush behind Stokes. He recognized Joe Stevens and Ad Cross. Terry Boyd saw them at the same time. "You double-crossing side-winder!" he accused Stokes. "You rigged up a sure-thing plant on me!"

"Me and the boys have to quit the country," Stokes said carelessly. "You sent for us this second time, and now you talk about playing it square. Shake him down, Joe!"

JOE STEVENS came forward behind his cocked six-shooter. He was tall and thin, with a long bony face, and a reckless gleam in his dark eyes. "Make one move!" he dared Boyd. "I'll do what I should have done this morning when I saw you sneaking away from the Circle F tack-room!"

Stevens jammed the muzzle of his pistol in Boyd's back, ran his hand over the 3 B man, and pulled out Boyd's shirt-tail. A flat wallet dropped to the ground, and Boyd's face expressed furious anger. "They'll nail you for Werner's death, Stokes! I left your knife in the body!"

Ben Stokes nodded slowly. "I missed that knife after you robbed me of the eight thousand," he said lightly. "That's why I sent word to the Saint; takes a thief to catch one, looks like!"

"Blow his brains out, Ben!" Cross said. "Tod Werner didn't amount to much, but he was part of the gang. This sneaking snake killed him, and he ain't fitten to live!"

"Tell him who that third feller was, the one who shot old Fred," Stokes said to Stevens.

"He was the one!" Stevens accused, and he spat to show his disgust. "That old hold-up might have talked after a while, but that wasn't fast enough for Boyd. Let him have it, boss!"

Ben Stokes shook his head. "Matter of honor," he said fiercely. "Boyd claims he has me faded on the draw-and-shoot. He's wrong, but I promised him a chance; it won't make any difference, but I made a promise!"

Jeff Dawson listened, and his eyes widened. Ben Stokes had every reason to kill Boyd, but now he was talking about a gun-fighter's honor. One of the oldest laws in the old West; the code of old Judge Colt.

"Leave me give the go-ahead," Stevens pleaded softly. "I'll keep to the side and take off my J. B. When I drop that old Stetson, you jaspers start clawing for your irons!"

Jeff stared through the brush with silent fascination. He wondered about Stang, and about Gospel Cummings. The old plainsman was a stickler for: *"Thou shalt not kill!"* Then, there was Bailey.

Joe Stevens walked to the side halfway between Stokes and Boyd. He took off his shapeless Stetson, held it at arms length, and glanced at the two fighters.

Ben Stokes was facing Boyd in the gun-fighter's crouch, with his body half-turned to thin the target he presented. Boyd faced the outlaw squarely, his right hand shadowing the grips of his forty-five.

"You, Bailey and Dawson!" a booming voice shouted. "Where in time are you hombres?"

JEFF DAWSON jerked and half-turned his head. Terry Boyd made a frantic dive into the brush, and Ben Stokes threw a shot and missed, as he took a step to the side and legged it into the brush. Stevens and Cross had disappeared, and when Dawson slapped for his gun, the little clearing was empty.

But only for a moment. Red Stang leaped from his hiding place and legged it after Boyd. Jeff Dawson followed at a run, and he was just in time to see Terry jump his horse which had stood ground-tied back in the brush.

Red Stang burst out of the brush and threw a shot at Boyd who answered with one of his own; both shots went wild, then Stang's gun roared again. Terry Boyd had sunk his spurs into the flanks of his horse after that first shot. He sagged as the horse leaped ahead, and Boyd crashed to the ground and bounced in the deer-trail.

Jeff Dawson stared at Stang, and drew his own gun. Red was leaning forward behind his smoking six-shooter, and his lips were snarled back to show tightly-clenched teeth. "Hold it Red!" Dawson shouted. "He's wounded bad!"

"Wounded hell; he's dead!" Stang growled savagely. "I waited three years to make sure!"

Gospel Cummings came running, followed by Bailey. They stared at Terry Boyd, back to Red Stang, and Cummings shook his head.

"Damn that lumbering deputy!" Bailey swore savagely. "We could have taken those other three, but he had to yell his head off when he found our horses back yonder!"

"And us up here on foot," Cummings added. "Is Boyd hurt bad?"

"Naw," Stang growled. "He's dead, the sneaking side-winder!"

"You ain't the law!" Cummings said sternly; "you could have throwed off your shot!"

"And him getting away?" Stang muttered. "I didn't savvy what kind of a play Bailey had in mind, but him and Stokes were getting set to burn powder. I was going to wait and see who won, but the Saint bought chips in the game, and spoiled the deal!"

John Saint John came galloping through the brush, his six-shooter in his right hand. "What's going on here?" he bellowed, and then he saw Boyd. "Who shot him?"

"I did for him," Red Stang said slowly, and now he was calm. "He was wanted by the law, and he was making his escape; he shot at me first, so I let him have it!"

"But you cowhands wouldn't ride in my posse!" Saint John said furiously.

"That's right," Cummings agreed. "You got here a mite late, Saint. Ben Stokes, Joe Stevens, and Ad Cross were all here too!"

"Let's take after them! They haven't much of a start!"

"Our horses are back aways, and that's start enough in these badlands," Cummings said with a cold smile. "Of course, you are mounted, and after all, you're the law in these parts."

"Get your horses, and we'll trail them," the deputy said more quietly. "You can read sign with the best, Gospel. We can run them to earth!"

"They won't go far," Cummings said with a shrug. He walked over to Boyd and felt for a pulse. He shook his head, and his brown eyes expressed sorrow as he looked reproachfully at Red Stang.

"It didn't call for a killing, Red," he said slowly. "You could have winged him through a shoulder, and knocked him out of his saddle."

"He had a killing coming!" Stang growled. "I killed him, and I'm glad for the first time in three years!"

JEFF DAWSON listened and watched the tall redhead. In a measure, Dawson felt that he had been cheated. He had made a promise at the graveside of old Jim; now Terry Boyd had paid the penalty.

"Go run for your horses, men!" Saint John urged. "We can clean up this nest of outlaws once and for all!"

No one made a move to obey the towering deputy. Bailey spoke quietly. "Ben Stokes has the five thousand," he reminded. "He took that three thousand from Boyd."

"You mean you saw it?" Saint John shouted. "What in tarnation where you jaspers a-doing?"

"Listening mostly," Charley answered quietly. "Letting those two unload their minds. Getting evidence, you might say."

"You get any?"

"Some," Bailey answered. "Terry Boyd admitted stealing Stokes' knife, and using it to kill Tod Werner with. Boyd meant for you to take after Stokes, so why don't you start on a man-hunt, deputy?"

"That wasn't all," Cummings added. "Joe Stevens confessed that it was him and Cross who beat up old Fred Haney; it was Terry Boyd who shot that old owl-hooter!"

Jeff was staring intently at Red Stang. His lips parted, and then Dawson clamped down on his lower lip. What he had to say could wait.

"We'll take Boyd back to town and send word to his brothers," Cummings murmured. "He's shot right through the heart!"

"I told you Red could call 'em," Bailey said slowly. "It was between him and Jeff; one of them was bound to kill Terry."

"I had first call on him," Stang said, and his voice was husky. "If you gents don't mind, I'll ride back alone. Got some thinking to do!"

"Do your thinking some other time!" Saint John barked. "Right now you are riding with me. Get your horse, and step about fast!"

Red turned slowly and faced the big deputy. His lip curled, and his shoulders trembled with anger. Then he whirled on one heel and stalked through the brush without speaking.

"You never will learn, Saint," Cummings said sadly. "Right now that cowboy would see you in Hades in your bare feet, before he'd ride with you. He did the work you get paid to do, but you still straddle a mighty high horse!"

"I'm the law in these parts!" Saint John bellowed angrily. "I've got the authority to swear in a posse when I need one!"

"You don't seem to have much luck," Bailey said coldly. "Give me a hand with the corpse, Gospel. We'll tie him on his own horse, and the law can take him back to town. Seems that's about all he does lately."

"You give me any more of your slack-jaw, I'll put you under arrest for obstructing justice!" the deputy threatened.

'You try it, Big Shorty!" Bailey challenged. "Now you can do your own work; I'm getting back to my horse!"

Saint John rubbed his chin. Charley Bailey walked away, and Dawson followed the big Circle F cowboy. Gospel Cummings jerked his head toward the body.

"Unload, Big Shorty," he said curtly. "You take his head; I'll take his heels!"

"I don't want any of your jaw, either!" Saint John growled.

Cummings straightened up. "You want it that away, so be it," he said quietly. "Load him on yourself!"

He walked away, leaving the deputy with the dead man. Saint John swore savagely as he bent his knees and lifted the body of Terry Boyd. Boyd was not a heavy man, and the deputy raised the body easily.

* * *

Cummings reined in at his cabin and went inside. He smiled when he saw two paper bills on the deal table. Two fifty dollar bills. A note placed under the money read: *"For services to be rendered for the members of the Stokes gang."*

Gospel Cummings read, and reached for his bottle. He muttered after taking a generous libation. "So Terry Boyd was part of the gang. I suspected it!"

14

GOSPEL CUMMINGS glanced up when a horse stopped at the tie-rail outside his cabin. He saw Jeff Dawson dismount, and a moment later the Triangle D cowboy came into the house. "I'm about to stir up a bait of hot grub for supper," Cummings said quietly. "Sit a spell and break bread with me."

"Thanks, old friend."

The light had gone out of Jeff's blue eyes, and he looked ten years older than when he had come in from the badlands. Gospel Cummings spoke gently. "Don't take it hard. Jeff," he murmured. "Red saved you from having blood on your hands. You've got to think of Connie, you know."

"But Boyd killed my Dad," Dawson muttered. "I had him under my sights back yonder; I damn near let him have it. Then I remembered what Bailey had said; I listened."

He glanced about the room, saw the money and note on the table, and leaned forward with excitement showing in his face. "That note," he said sharply. "Who wrote it?"

"Ben Stokes wrote it," Cummings answered. "Why do you ask?"

"The pieces of the puzzle we spoke about," Dawson said slowly. "All the pieces are beginning to fit together. The man who wrote this note is the same hombre who left that note in my house when you and me first rode over to the Triangle D!"

"Knew it looked familiar."

"What do you make of it?" Dawson asked.

Gospel shrugged. "Ben Stokes is an outlaw," he answered. "He's been one for years. He never overlooks a bet. It means he wants that treasure, buried back there some where on the Triangle D range!"

Cummings cut steaks from a slab of beef and set his skillets on the stove. Jeff Dawson got to his feet and stared at the entrance to the Devil's Graveyard. He spoke carelessly to Cummings as he left the cabin. "I'll be back in a few minutes. I'm going out there to talk some with old Jim."

Cummings made no answer, but he watched the tall cowboy go through the entrance to the Burying ground. Dawson walked between the rows of volcanic head-stones. His eyes narrowed when he saw a horse ground-tied at the far end of the cemetery. A Morgan horse with black points.

Dawson clenched his teeth and started toward the horse. Old Jim was buried back there. There were other men buried in the back section; men who died with or without boots.

Another mourner was in the place of rest; a tall redhead with a smoke-grimed gun in his holster. He was kneeling beside an old grave.

Dawson stopped and watched Red Stang, the man who had cheated him of his vengeance. Stang's lips were moving, and occasionally he would gesture with his left hand. As though he were talking to someone, and explaining what had happened.

Jeff drew closer, and Stang heard the scuff of approaching boots. He stood up with his right hand close to his holster; relaxed when he recognized Dawson. "Howdy, Red," Dawson said softly, and removed his hat.

"Did you follow me here?"

Dawson shook his head. "I came back here to talk to an old feller," he answered. "I wanted to tell old Jim that he could take his rest now that Terry Boyd is kicking up hot ashes in the Devil's coal-pile!"

"Funny," Stang muttered. "Jim Dawson is resting right next to old Fred Haney. I was just talking to old Fred."

"Haney has been dead three years."

"He was an outlaw," Stang said slowly. "But old Jim saw that he got a decent burial."

"Old Jim was branded a lobo when we buried him here," Dawson said in a muffled voice. "You ever stop to think how things work out, Red?"

"I've done nothing else for three years," Stang answered. "The same sidewinder did for both those old He's; they were both marked with the owlhoot brand, and now they rest here together!"

"You worked for Terry Boyd," Dawson said musingly. "You tipped him off about me and Ben Stokes. Then you killed him!"

"I trailed that son for a year down in Texas," Stang stated quietly. "I was riding behind the badge of a Texas Ranger, like you know. I had to be sure!"

"Why did you do all this?"

"I made a promise to an old feller," Stang muttered.

"To Fred Haney?"

"That's right," Stang agreed. "Haney came to me when I was just your age; just before I was twenty-one. Told me how come him to be tangled up with the James gang."

"I knew old Fred, that is, for a few hours before he..." Dawson said gently. "I'd like to know."

"Seems like old Fred got drunk one night," Stang said gruffly. "He was drinking with a bunch of fellers who had plenty of money. They left old Fred outside one saloon to hold the horses. Then this gang robbed the saloon, and Fred had to ride off with them!"

"When he sobered up?" Dawson asked. "What did Haney do then?"

"They were back in the brush then," Stang explained. "The leader told Haney that the townspeople had recognized him holding the horses for a fast get-away. This leader was one of the James boys!"

"He joined the gang?"

RED STANG frowned. "He couldn't quit," he said angrily. "After that, he always held the horses!"

"They held up the Katy flyer down there in the Nations," Dawson

said reminsciently. "They held up several other trains."

Stang nodded. "I know," he said gruffly. "That's when the law began to close in. Jesse James was killed by Bob Ford, and the rest of the gang rode their spurs up here and hid the loot. Old Fred Haney was with them at the time."

"Most of the gang was captured or killed," Dawson said quietly; "where was old Fred all that time?"

"For two years he was back in the hills walking sheep," Stang answered. "Then he grew a beard, and he worked as a swamper in border saloons."

"We've got a lot in common," Jeff Dawson said gruffly, and he stared hard at Red Stang. "I knew it this afternoon!"

"You knew what?"

"That you were kin to old Fred Haney!"

Red Stang whirled with a hand on his gun. "He wasn't kin to me!" he denied furiously; "he was just an old saloon bum who got a bad deal!"

"Yeah," Dawson agreed. "So after he held those horses that first time down there in Texas, folks began calling you the...Lobo's Whelp!"

Red Stang's six-shooter hissed against holster leather as the gun leaped to his right hand. He jammed the weapon in Dawson's belly, leaned against it with the hammer back, and glared hotly into Dawson's calm eyes. "Unsay them words!" he demanded hoarsely. "Before I lean against the trigger!"

"You won't shoot," Dawson said quietly. "Old Fred was your Dad, and we both know it. Old Jim was my Dad, and I'm not ashamed of it!"

Red Stang glared and then stepped back. He holstered his pistol, turned his back, and sank down near the old grave. "He *was* my old man. He came up here three years ago to find that loot. He was going to turn it over to the law, and take what they gave him. He never had a chance!"

"That's what old Jim aimed to do," Dawson said slowly; "I aim to do the same thing, if I ever find it."

Red Stang looked up and studied Dawson's bronzed face. "Is that on the level?"

"I swear it, on the grave of old Jim!"

"You'll take me in as pards on this new deal? To find the loot, and turn it over to the law?"

"Here's my hand on it," Dawson answered. Red Stang gripped the Triangle D cowboy hard. "I'll take the same swear on old Fred's grave."

Red followed Dawson between the graves, and they entered Cummings' cabin together. The old plainsman smiled and pointed to the table where three places had been set.

"How'd you know I'd be here?" Stang asked.

"Knew you'd head back here to tell old Fred," Cummings said quietly. "I saw the resemblance the night you talked to Terry at the Circle F dance."

Red Stang stared and then glanced at Dawson. Jeff smiled and nodded. "Don't forget that Gospel is the best sign-reader in these parts," he reminded Stang.

"And don't forget that I knew old Fred when we were both yearlings," Cummings added. "You're the spitting image of him when we was both riding for the XIT. Let's fly at those steaks before they get cold."

THE THREE MEN ate in silence, each busy with his own thoughts.

"Old Fred came up here to find the loot," Cummings finally broke the silence. "I talked to him just before he died."

Red Stang glanced up from his plate. "Did he tell you where it was buried?"

"Not exactly. But he knew about where to look. There was a big cave near a waterfall, between two low hills. A creek flowed along up above."

Jeff showed excitement. "There used to be a creek back there where Boyd died," he said. "That creek has been dry for several years, but there used to be a small waterfall there too!"

"Yeah, I know," Cummings murmured. "I didn't think the time was right to look for it."

"Jeff and I have made a deal, Gospel," Stang spoke up; "we want to find that loot and turn it over to the law!"

"Then you've got two more partner's," Cummings said with a smile. "Count me in!"

"I don't want any part of that mouthy deputy!" Stang declared. "I won't work with him!"

"You mean you won't work with the law?"

"Not with Saint John!"

"The Saint don't lack none for cold nerve."

"That big son is all ankles and wrists!" Stang said angrily. "I ought to know; I rode behind a badge for two years. The Saint blunders around like an old range bull that has been whipped out of the herd. Like this afternoon when we had the Stokes gang under our guns!"

"There's other kinds of law," Cummings said quietly.

Red Stang tapped his holster. "I've plenty of that kind right here."

Gospel Cummings frowned. "That kind of law made an owl-hooter of many a good man. Now you take the best kind of a peace officer; he does very little talking, but you can always depend on him in a pinch."

Jeff stared at the bearded face, trying to read what was going on behind those sorrowful brown eyes. "You mentioned another feller, and you've been palavering about the law. You mean Charley Bailey?"

"Son, that's reading sign with the best! When did you guess that Bailey was a law-dog?"

"I was sure of it today. Charley wanted to get evidence, and he used to be a Texas Ranger. There's something about the way he looks at a man; something in the way he talks."

"You mean Bailey is riding behind a law-star now?" Stang asked slowly. "Did he tell you?"

Gospel Cummings shook his head. "He never said a word, but it all adds up!"

"But he wouldn't work with the Saint," Dawson reminded; "and Saint John is the law in these parts."

"And he's kinda noisy, like Red pointed out," Cummings explained. "There's only one kind of a law-star Charley could be wearing. He's working for the Circle F, and he came here from Oklohoma. Before that he was in Texas. What's your guess, Red?"

"United States deputy marshal," Stang said promptly. "Roving commission, or on a special assignment; he's out to recover that loot, and to nail the Stokes gang!"

"You and Jeff want to work with me and Charley?"

"That's good enough for me," Dawson agreed, without hesitation.

"Suits me down to a gnat's eyelash," Stang agreed eagerly. "I rode with Charley many's the time down there in Texas. I should have figured him long before this!"

"Company coming," Stang said quickly. "Looks like old Cole Brighton and his pretty daughter."

JEFF DAWSON pushed back from the table and ran outside. He greeted the old cattleman warmly, and tipped his hat to Connie. "I'll go in and talk to Gospel," Brighton said. "You youngsters can visit if you want to."

Connie dismounted, and Dawson tied up her horse. They walked across the yard toward the old barn, and sat down on a log. "I'm glad, Jeff," Connie said in a whisper. "Glad you did not have to keep your promise!"

"In a way, I'm glad too," Dawson agreed; "being in love sotter changes a man in some ways."

For a long time there was silence. Then Jeff said in a quiet whisper: "I'm going to ask Red Stang to be my best man!"

"I like Red," Connie agreed. "He's so much like you in so many ways. I've noticed his eyes when he didn't know any one was watching. Like he was hiding something he was ashamed of."

"Yeah, Red is like me in some ways; remember what they used to call me?"

Connie Brighton shuddered. "Let's not think of it," she whispered.

"They called Red the same thing,

back in Texas," Jeff said soberly. "You see, old Fred Haney was Red's Dad!"

Connie caught her breath sharply. "Now I know why he killed Terry Boyd," she answered.

"You never can tell," Dawson murmured. "Tom Boyd and his brother Dixon are as honest as the day is long; Terry was a member of the Stokes gang!"

Connie grasped Jeff by the left hand. "Ben Stokes is still at large!" she said excitedly. "With two of his men!"

"That's right," Dawson agreed. "But they won't be for long."

"Promise me not to get into any more trouble," Connie pleaded. "Let Saint John handle those outlaws."

Jeff Dawson sighed. "I've made an agreement," he said hesitantly. "With old Gospel, Red Stang, and Charley Bailey. We are going to hunt that gang down before Stokes finds the buried loot!"

"Must you!" Connie murmured. Then she changed and squeezed the cowboy's hand. "I know you will," she said proudly. "But do be careful, Jeff."

GOSPEL CUMMINGS smiled when the young couple came into the cabin. Cole Brighton was smoking his old brier pipe, and he allowed the smoke to curl up over his head. "When will you be of age, Jeff?"

"In about three months, give or take a day. Any particular reason, old Cole?"

"Gwan!" Brighton snorted; "you ain't fooling anybody, yearling!"

"That's reading sign," Gospel Cummings said with a chuckle.

"I don't know what you mean," Dawson muttered, his face flushed.

"I'll do it for you, pard," Red Stang added his bit. "Just tell me when."

"Bunch of comical hands," Dawson growled.

"Wait until you are of age, and this thing is settled," Cole Brighton said pointedly. "You hear me, gal?"

"I didn't say anything, Dad," Connie protested. "We don't know what you are talking about; do we Jeff?"

Jeff Dawson squared back his shoulders. "Yes, we do; and I'm glad if we look so happy that all the world can tell we're in love. Any of you characters want to make something out of that?"

"I do," Cole Brighton answered promptly, and he extended his right hand. "Let me be the first to congratulate you, my boy!... But about this other deal; this is another round-up job for all the cattlemen in the Strip. The Boyd boys sent word over that they would be riding over tomorrow to help clean out the Stokes gang!"

15

JEFF DAWSON sat up in his bunk in the Triangle D ranch-house. Red Stang sat erect in the opposite bunk. Both cowboys put on their Stetsons, and stomped into their boots, donned the balance of their range attire.

The sun was just winking over the rim of Lobos Peak. Dawson stirred cake batter, and lined the skillet with bacon. With the blackened coffee pot on the back of the stove, and the fire going good, Dawson cleared his throat. "There will be Ace Fleming and part of the Circle F crew," he said slowly. "Cole Brighton and his Box B riders, and those fellers from the 3 B."

"So we'll get an early start like we agreed."

Half an hour later they mounted their horses and struck out toward the northwest. They rode in silence until they reached the fringe of the badlands. Both reined their horses to a stop when a dull muffled boom echoed back from the distant foothills.

"Dynamite," Stang murmured. "Ben Stokes isn't losing any time, and we better not lose any more!"

They followed the trail of the preceding day, but now they circled to

the west of the two little hills. Riding watchfully, with a deep seat in the saddle, like a born cowboy always does when the business at hand is serious.

They had talked over their plan, and each knew exactly what to do. This time they would come in and cut off the one avenue of escape which had been left open to Stokes and his henchmen when Charley Bailey had listened to get evidence.

A dust-and-smoke cloud hovered over the little depression between the two hills where the outlaw loot was thought to be buried. The dust was settling as the two cowboys rode toward the place where a gang of desperate outlaws had hidden their ill-gotten gains some ten years before.

Jeff Dawson knew every foot of the badlands from bitter experience. He took the lead and rode into a narrow defile, dismounted, and ground-tied his horse with trailing whangs for a fast get-away, in the event that one would be needed.

Stang followed Dawson's example, and both loosened their six-shooters against crimp, after the long ride. Again Jeff took the lead and continued through the defile with Stang crowding his heels. Then they heard excited voices. "The loot is here, Ben! Good thing we brought these gunny-sacks; these old saddle-bags are rotten!"

"That's Stevens," Stang said; "he had a hand in beating up old Fred!"

"Don't get to fighting your head," Dawson cautioned; "that ain't the law-way, pard!"

The two crept forward and paused at the mouth of the defile. They could see the gaping mouth of a big cave where fresh earth had been blasted recently. The smell of black powder was strong in the morning air to verify the explosion they had heard.

A man was standing in the entrance of the cave with his back to them. A tall lean man with the features of a hawk, and a brace of heavy six-shooters thonged to his sinewy thighs. "Joe Stevens," Stang whispered.

He took a step to the left to thin the target they made. A small pebble rattled under Stang's boot, and Stevens whirled like a vicious cat. The tall outlaw's two hands rapped down for his twin sixes, but Red Stang was already in action.

The ex-Ranger made his draw, thumbing back the hammer on the up-pull. Orange lame belched from his hand just as Stevens cleared leather with his pair of matched forty-fives.

Joe Stevens was slapped into a turn as the heavy slug caught him in the left shoulder. He stomped his boot to stop the turn, and his right hand arced around with his six-shooter swinging for a target.

Jeff saw that murderous killer-gun swinging to center on Red Stang. Dawson triggered a shot while Stang was notching back his hammer for a follow-up that would have been too late.

Joe Stevens grunted and went to his knees with both arms hanging limply at his sides. Dawson and Stang took to the brush like rabbits, one on each side of the trail. A shot lashed the tall bracken just as Dawson made his dive to safety.

Red Stang answered the winking firefly that lanced from the interior of the cave. This gave Dawson time to change his position, and he sent three shots into the cave to seal off escape.

THE ECHOES of the thundering guns died away in the low ring of hills. Two keen-eyed men watched the entrance to the cave, out in the early sunshine. Two trapped men stared at the light from the dark recesses of the musty cave which had been sealed off ten years earlier.

Joe groaned and sat up. "Stay back, Ben!" he shouted hoarsely. "It's Stang and Dawson, and I'm done for!"

"Crawl back in here!" Stokes shouted. "If you can make it, we'll patch you up!"

"Stay where you are!" Stang said sternly. "Or I'll dot your squinchy eyes, you blasted owlhooter!"

"I'm bleeding out," Stevens answered.

"Crawl back here!" Dawson shouted; "I'll do what I can for you, but if your pards get Red, I'll smoke you down pronto!"

"Wait a minute, Joe!" Stokes yelled. "How bad are you hurt?"

"Got a slug through each shoulder," Stevens answered weakly; "I'm losing a bucket of blood!"

"Crawl on out. You'll stretch a new rope if the law gets you!"

Stevens staggered to his feet and came slowly down the trail. Red watched the cave and spoke from the side of his mouth. "Take care of him, Jeff. I'll see that Stokes and Ad Cross stays put!"

"Up the defile!" Dawson shouted. "Stop just around the bend!"

Joe started through the defile, went to his knees, and crawled around the bend. Dawson wormed his way through the brush and joined the wounded man. "Red would have killed you yesterday," he told Stevens. "You had a hand in beating up old Fred Haney!"

"Plug up them holes," Stevens pleaded. "You can at least stop the bleeding!"

Dawson reached for his knife and cut away the blood-soaked shirt. He examined the ugly wounds in both shoulders; used bits of cloth torn from the prisoner's shirt-tail to fashion a pair of crude cloth plugs.

Stevens winced and swayed with bullet-shock. Dawson made a pair of tourniquets, applied them above the brachial points, and twisted the tourniquets tight with short sticks.

"Whyn't you kill me?" Stevens moaned. "This away, I'll be crippled for life!"

"You won't live long." Red called back coldly.

"Get back up there where we can watch you," Dawson ordered the wounded man. "The law will be along pretty soon, and I want to talk some to your pards!"

"Ben won't ever give up," Stevens muttered.

DAWSON helped Stevens to his feet, and steered the outlaw toward the mouth of the defile. Stevens sat down in the grass and leaned heavily against a volcanic rock. "My luck ran out," he muttered. "There's better than a hundred thousand in money, not counting a sack of jewelry."

"You in the cave!" Dawson shouted. "Jeff Dawson speaking!"

"Keep on talking," Stokes answered sullenly. "We'll cut you and Stang in for half of the loot, for a chance to ride on out!"

"I wouldn't trust you with snow-water, and let you melt it yourself," Dawson answered. "Come out and surrender; we will guaruntee you protection, and a fair trial!"

"Guess again! You were an owl-hooter your ownself for three years. You and Stang want all the loot for yourselves!"

"Better surrender, Stokes," Stang called clearly. "All the cattlemen are headed this way, and every one of them carries a rope on his saddle!"

"You ain't the law any more!"

"Did you know old Fred Haney?" Stang asked, his voice was raspy with strain.

"I knew that old swamper," Stokes answered. "He got drunk one night in Conestoga, and talked with his mouth wide open. Said he was coming up here to recover the loot, and turn it over to the law!"

"If that was good enough for him, it's good enough for me," Stang said clearly; "Fred Haney was my old man!"

There was a moment of silence while the two outlaws digested Stang's statement. Then Stokes said slowly: "No wonder you did for Terry Boyd!"

"One thing more, Stokes," Dawson said sharply. "You wrote that note and left it in my Triangle D house the day after old Jim was buried!"

"Not that it matters, and you're just guessing."

"I'm not guessing," Dawson said positively. "It matched the writing you left down at Three Points, in Gospel Cummings' cabin!"

"Did some one mention my name?" a deep voice asked, and the gaunt

plainsman raised his head from the brush behind Red Stang.

"Gospel!" Dawson said jerkily. "I didn't hear you snaking your way through the grass!"

"So I noticed," Cummings agreed dryly. "You see, Jeff, I used to fight the redskins; I'm glad you and Red didn't kill Stevens."

"Are you that old sin-buster?" Stevens asked hopefully.

Gospel Cummings frowned. "I'm the caretaker of Hell's Half Acre," he said, with simple dignity.

"Give me a snort of snake-bite." Stevens pleaded; "I've lost a lot of blood."

Cummings reached into the tail of his long coat, brought out a bottle, and removed the cork. He held the bottle to the wounded outlaw's lips, and Stevens drank a deep draft. "Builds a man up where he's all tore down," Stevens muttered. "Can I have one for the other leg?"

Cummings nodded and held the bottle to the prisoner's pallid lips. Stevens regained some of his color, and his voice was stronger when he shouted at his companions in the cave. "Better give up, Ben! Old Gospel Cummings is here, and the law won't be long!"

"Got your note, Stokes," Cummings called. "Thanks for the donation. "Better come out with your hands up, you and Cross!"

"Go to hell!" Ben Stokes answered, and three shots rattled from the cave to cut the brush above Joe Stevens' head.

GOSPEL CUMMINGS was crouched to the side. His gun leaped to his big hand, and he spaced two shots between the fireflies which had winked out in the cave. A yell greeted his shots, then there was a brooding silence which matched the sorrow in the plainsman's brown eyes.

"Better cave and pitch your weapons out!" Cummings called sternly. "If the cattlemen get here, they'll burn you out, and kill you like rats. Better surrender now like men!"

"Don't shoot!" a voice called shakily. "One of your slugs creased Ben, and I'm coming out to surrender!"

Red and Jeff Dawson crouched forward, six-shooters ready for war. Ad Cross appeared in the cave with his hands above his head. Dawson leaped to his feet and ran up the steep trail. "Take care of Cross!" he shouted at Stang. "I'll get Ben Stokes!"

"Down, you fool!" Stang shouted; "that owlhooter might be playing possum!"

Jeff heard the warning. He threw himself down and just inside the cave. A six-shooter roared thunderously, and a bullet whined above his head as Dawson hit the floor of the cave.

Dawson rolled over and triggered a slug at the flash of the bushwhack gun. He heard gun-metal thud to the floor, and then a voice spoke hoarsely. "Don't shoot again, Whelp. I'm caving complete!"

"On your feet!" Dawson ordered sternly. "Walk out the cave, or I'll finish what old Gospel started!"

"I'm coming out!" Stokes warned the men outside. "I'm wounded bad, so don't shoot!"

Jeff Dawson's eyes had now shed the sunlight, and he saw Ben Stokes approaching the mouth of the cave. Dawson got to his feet, stepped behind Stokes, and herded the wounded outlaw leader into the clear.

A trickle of blood ran down the outlaw's scalp to show where Cummings' bullet had creased his skull. His left arm hung at his side, and his right hand was shattered and bleeding from the bullet Dawson had fired at the flashing gun.

With three wounds, Ben Stokes walked down the steep trail with no sign of fear. A group of horse-backers were racing up the east trail with Ace Fleming and Charley Bailey in the lead.

"Quite a party," Stokes said carelessly. "Well, I knew the rat-race would end some day."

Charley Bailey slid his horse to a stop, and took in the situation at a glance. He walked up to Stokes and spoke sternly. "You and your pards are under arrest, Stokes. "Deputy U.S. Marshal Bailey speaking.

Anything you say will be used against you!"

"Hawgwash!" Stokes sneered. "I said it all the other day when you were listening, but I never figured you for the law-joker in the deck!"

"They are your prisoners, Marshal," Red Stang told Bailey. "Jeff and I want to take a loek at that loot in the cave. You don't mind?"

"Not a bit, Red," Bailey answered gruffly. "We will be waiting here for you!"

Stang and Dawson walked up the steep trail together. Into the mouth of the cave which had been sealed off for ten long years.

"The loot is yonder," Dawson said in a hushed voice.

They crossed the big cave together, and stood looking down on four old leather saddle-bags. The leather had rotted with age, and gold and paper money was spilled on the limestone floor. Dawson leaned down and prodded a chamois sack, and it bursted to cascade a stream of flashing jewels on the floor.

"Two men died back here for this stuff," Jeff said slowly. "Your old man, and mine!"

"They will sleep better now," Stang answered quietly; "they both wanted to turn this loot over to the law."

"If that was good enough for them, it suits us," Dawson murmured. "Chips off the old blocks!"

"Whelps, they called us both," Stang added. "But we rode on the right side of the law!"

"Yeah," Dawson agreed. "You'll be the best man at my wedding, pard?"

Stang nodded his red head, and an expression of sadness crossed his thin young face. "And then I'll be drifting."

"You don't like it here?" Dawson asked.

"I like it fine!"

"Then buy in again and pardner me in the Triangle D," Dawson said quickly. "We can build a first-class spread in five years or so!"

"You mean it, Jeff?"

"One man can't do much by himself on a cattle spread, but two men can make a good thing of it," Dawson answered earnestly.

Red Stang sucked in a deep breath. and offered his hand with a smile. "There's a little filly down in Texas," he admitted shyly. "We'll have us a double wedding, and I'll build a place on the Triangle D!"

They left the cave without another look at the treasure, walked down the steep trail, and joined the party which now numbered a score of armed men. Red Stang spoke to Charley Bailey. "The loot is all there in the cave, Marshal. Jeff and I want to turn it all over to the law."

"Spoke like a man, Red," said Gospel Cummings.

"Red and I are going to be pards in the Triangle D," Dawson announced. "And that ain't all. Red is going back to Texas to get the future Mrs. Stang; we're going to have us a double wedding!"

Dawson walked back into the brush to get his horse. Stang followed him for an excuse to get away from the crowd. They caught their horses, mounted up, and then rode away from the group.

"Let 'em go," Gospel Cummings told the smiling cattlemen. "But take a good look at a pair of men who have growed up fast. Seems only yesterday that we were calling Jeff Dawson the Lobo's Whelp!"

THE END

FORTY-ROD JUSTICE

by C. William Harrison

Believe it or not — it wasn't just delirium when the fantastic Bertie Waddington appeared unto Limberlegs Ferguson, even if he was half-shot at the moment!

IT IS hotter than the underside of a saddle blanket that day, and I have managed to find myself a slice of shade behind a boulder where I can keep my eye on the mouth of Diablo gulch. I've got a ten dollar hunch that Pete Malvern and his outlaws are coming out of that gulch before the afternoon is over, and I am pretty sad about it all.

I have just finished the first half pint of forty-rod, which proves how sad I am about the short life deputy sheriffs have in Hornita county. I am beginning to think about the second bottle of coffin varnish I brought along when I see something you don't expect to see after drinking only one half pint.

At first I figure it is one of Pete Malvern's owlhooters sneakin' around to take a pot shot at me, and I am as scared as the barkeep who offered Carrie Nation a drink on the house.

Then I see that the hombre who's following the trail I made across the valley couldn't possibly be one of Malvern's gang. Not in clothes like this here fellow is duded up in. I am plumb dazzled by them, and I am sitting there gawking admiringly when the stranger finally gets to where I am. He's so busy concentrating on my trail that he doggone near walks his horse right up my frame.

"Hey!" I yelp at him.

He sees me then, and at first he looks a little startled. "I say, old fellow—there you are!" he kind of belches at me.

I am still staring at his clothes, on account of the likes of them I ain't seen since Lord Waddington got rustled out of the ranching business and went back to England.

He's wearing a cream-colored derby that would make a drunken Piute's mouth water, and you could have played checkers on his pants. It is plumb sinful the way he is duded up on a working day—Sunday shirt with a stiff collar and four-in-hand tie, and the gold watch chain across his vest is big enough to hobble a yearling steer. Being fast in my noggin, I figure right now that he's another English Lord, or something. Only I can't understand how-come he took all the trouble of tracking me down, especially on the day I'm scheduled to be busy with the Malvern gang.

He climbs down from his horse like he's planning to stay for a spell, and I wonder if maybe he ain't thirsty and has spotted my other bottle of forty-rod.

"Frightfully hot," he says, and all the time he is looking at me through one of those one-eyed windows that genuine British articles always wear. He has a round face that is as red

as Moriority's underwear the day they dressed him up to be buried. He has a big lump of a nose, and I catch myself wondering if the nose hadn't been born first and the rest of him kind of growed on behind it. He mops his brow again. "Dreadfully hot."

"Not over a hundred and fifteen," I opine.

I can see he's not really interested in the temperature, but has some other problem on his mind. Then he comes right out with it.

"I say, old chap, I just arrived at the village today. Cactus Junction, you know. I inquired of the village hostler, and he directed me in this direction. Rawther admirable of me, don't you think, following your spoor so expertly?"

Holy Moses, I think, *did I go and leave one of them things behind me?* Then I remember how Lord Waddington used to talk when I guided him on hunting trips, and I know I haven't lost anything after all.

"Downright smart of you," I growl, trying to give him the idea that I want to be alone. "An Apache couldn't have done better; only you tracked down the wrong gent."

He peers at me through that one-window spectacle screwed up in his right eye. "I say—you are pulling my leg, aren't you? I mean, you are Mr. Ferguson, aren't you?"

I DON'T know whether to lie or tell the truth. If I admit I am Limberlegs Ferguson, I know this fellow is going to hang around until I have to uncork the second half pint. If I pick another name for myself, I figure this hombre is going to look so unhappy that I will have to offer him a drink, just to cheer him up. Either way I consider it, two men on one midget bottle is a sorrowful situation.

While my brain is busy with the problem, his voice keeps on making awful noises in my delicate ears. "Really now, I couldn't have erred in following your spoor, old chap. I read Sir Conan Doyle religiously, you know—deduction, clues, all that sort of rot. And Cooper's *Deerslayer* is most lucid in describing the proper method by which one follows a spoor. So it's jolly well difficult to see how I could be in error. You are Mr. Ferguson, aren't you—Mr. Limberlegs Ferguson?"

I give up, and admit that I am.

"Bully!" he says. Then he beams at me friendly-like. "Amazing name you have, if I may say so. Extrawdinary!"

"My old man," I tell him, "was at the throttle of the first train into Sioux country. He was lonely, and one day he met a pretty Sioux girl —anyhow, I'm half Injun and half engineer."

He doesn't know which way to go with that yarn. "Haw! Well, really now...hmmm."

I tell him that it has been nice meeting him, and turn back to my unhappy chore of waiting for the Malvern gang to come out of Diablo gulch and either kill me or be captured. But the Britisher don't take the hint.

"You just cawn't trot me off like this, old boy. I spanned an ocean and a blooming big continent just to see you, you know. I really cawn't leave now, old bean."

I don't know whether I am going to bust him on the nose or not, on account of his cheerful way of insulting me. I don't like being called old, me being only twenty-seven and having powerful muscles and a six-shooter that is fast enough to make Billy the Kid glad it was Garrett got to him first, and not me. I give the Britisher my cold-eyed stare, but for some reason it doesn't take.

"This is going to jolly well surprise you, old chap," he trumpets at me. "I am Bertie Waddington. And a chip off the old block, you know—Lord Jethro Waddington's son. Right-o!"

I stare at him, wondering what old Waddington had done to deserve a dude like this. Bertie goes right on chirping out his glad news.

"I decided I'd been living the gay life for too long. It was jolly good fun, dashing around the bright lights and flirting with the girls, drinking

ale in the pubs. But the pater was beginning to think I was a wastrel, don't you know."

He shoves out his chest, glowing at me. "Pater, I said to him one day —Pater, the time has come for me to start making a place for myself in the world. I am going to America, by Jove, and become a cow person. On second thought, I think I shall become a constable like your old friend Limberlegs Ferguson. I shall become his assistant, and ride the heath and capture criminals. That's what I told the pater, and here I am. You will take me on, won't you?"

He is so eager it hurts, and for once my agile brain fails me. I gulp at him. I hold out my second half pint, but he shakes his head. I take one for myself.

"I'll be your companion in danger," he goes on. "A bully life we'll lead. Ho, for the heath and the lawless cow persons we'll bring to justice!"

I HAVE another long bracer of forty-rod. By now my legs are warm again, and my brain is unlimbering. I begin to feel a fatherly interest in Bertie.

"So you want to be a lawman?"

"Right-o!"

"I am a deputy sheriff," I tell him. "It is a sad and thankless task in this county, Bertie old hoss, and I wouldn't for a minute let you live such a sorry life as mine."

"Really, old boy, I am determined. I insist!"

"Bertie, let me tell you why I am so sad today. You are looking at a gent who is seeing the wonders of this world for the last time. Bertie old hoss, I am about to die trying to capture the notorious Malvern owlhooters, and a meaner gang of killers you never did see. Duty has called, old pard, and I am about to give my all to the cause of justice."

Bertie looks as happy as if he is beneficiary of my will. "Jove!"

I measure off another finger of forty-rod, and try to impress Bertie with the sad state of my affairs. "Sheriff Bruner is even now trying to find a small herd of young breeder bulls that were rustled from rancher Cartwright last week. The sheriff is thirty miles south of here, and I alone must face the notorious Pete Malvern outlaws."

Bertie looks as pleased as the undertaker when the Lincoln County war broke out. He looks downright happy over my coming martyrhood.

"Jove!" he says again. "Egad!" Then he makes his jaw hard, like mine is. "I'm a chip off the old block, you know. We Waddingtons are made of stern stuff, Mr. Ferguson. You and I will stand together in this clarion call of justice."

Right then I like him better and better. But I have ethics, and I can't allow the son of my old English friend to be killed siding me in my personal fight. Besides, I know that if the Malvern outlaws killed Bertie, chances are there'll be a hell of a ruckus between England and New Mexico Territory.

I am trying to figure out a way to shake Bertie without hurting his feelings, when I notice a low fog of dust a long way out in the desert. About ten miles out, I figure, and I know that dust is being kicked up by the Malvern gang on their way to make the raid I got the tip on. My brain starts calculating rapid-like, and I know they'll come up from the desert through Diablo gulch and will be where I am in about an hour.

I look at Bertie, and I can see he's got a stubborn streak in him that's hard to handle. But being quick in my mind is what made me a successful deputy, and it doesn't take me long to figure a way to keep Bertie from getting killed and at the same time preserve England's friendly relations with New Mexico territory.

"Bertie," I tell him, and I give him my grim-eyed look. "I am going to make you my assistant."

"Bully!" he says.

"But we must be better prepared, old hoss, and I have a plan. I will hold off Malvern outlaws while you go get us some bullets."

His mouth hangs wide open as he listens to me. "Amazin'," he declares.

"Extrawdinary! But really, old fellow, I cawn't comprehend . . ." Then he gets tight-mouthed, and shows that men of the Waddington breed can follow an order without questioning it.

"Right-o!" he says grimly, and grabs up the reins of the horse he rented in town. Then he asks, "What color?"

I rub my ears and think for a while that I have had too much forty-rod, something which never happened to me before. But I realize that he is from another country, and make allowances for him.

"Doesn't matter," I answer.

"Right-o! Color immaterial. One more question, then I'm off. How many?"

"As many as you can get...45's" I tell him patiently.

He doesn't bat an eye, even if it is plain that he doesn't understand. He piles onto the horse, and even if he wasn't born in New Mexico he can ride like a rodeo hand. I settle back and kill off the forty-rod, and I am kind of proud of myself. I will be a hero in my country. They'll remember me for giving my life for justice and preserving the bond of friendship between England and New Mexico.

I HAVE MY two guns out and lined up on the mouth of the gulch when the Malvern gang shows up about an hour later. I yell that they are dead dogies if they don't give up pronto, but they don't believe me. They dive out of saddle, all four of them, and scatter like coyote pups.

They start right out to make things uncomfortable for me, and I am surprised how good they are with guns. They keep knocking chips off the rock I am stretched out behind, and I shoot back at them, but my gun-eye is off that day and I can't seem to hit anybody.

What I know for sure is I've got to circulate around and make them think I'm a posse instead of one Limberlegs Ferguson, if I'm going to live much longer.

I crawl a few yards away from the boulder, but I learn pronto that my strength stayed back there behind the rock. I crawl back, having a hunch it's just as easy to die one place as another.

It ain't long before Pete Malvern is yelling to his pards that I'm all alone, and they start bellying through the sage to get a clear shot at me. I start shivering, but only because I am so mad. Being brave, I am not scared of dying. It's only that I know I am going to be killed in the best part of my life that gives me the idea that maybe I should make a break for the horse I hid in an arroyo not far away. Then I remember that my legs are not as powerful as they were before I drank the forty-rod, and I'll be chopped down like a beefed steer if I try to run. So I decide to cash in my chips like a hero.

I am trying to find a target for my guns when I hear one of the outlaws out there cut loose with a funny kind of yelp. Then after a while I hear the same kind of groaning yelp from another angle. I am trying to figure that out when I discover that there are only two outlaws shaking the brush as they crawl toward me. Even my sharp brain can't figure that out.

I send a slug toward a clump of sage, and wonder why the bullet kicked up dirt three yards to one side. I am looking to see if the front gun sight got bent, when I hear another groaning yelp. I look up quick, and see Pete Malvern himself sneaking through the brush toward me.

I snap a shot at him, but this time my gun shoots off to the left. I am about to allow for the wind next shot, when something that looks like a black and white shadow catches my sharp eyes. Whatever it is, it's behind Pete Malvern.

THEN SUDDEN-LIKE, I get the hunch. That black and white shadow is Bertie Waddington sneaking up behind Pete Malvern. I am so surprised that I can't do anything while Malvern lines up his sights

to knock me off. The killer is thumbing back his gun hammer when Bertie jumps out of the brush and clouts him on the back of the head. Malvern doesn't have any interest left in adding my scalp to his list.

I let out a whoop, knowing right then that I have managed to bring the Malvern outlaws to justice. I am trotting out to tie up the killers when I see Bertie go busting back through the brush like a scared jackrabbit.

I yell at him not to be afraid for I will take care of the outlaws, but he is already out of sight. I have the killers hogtied when Bertie shows up a few minutes later driving a herd of bull calves ahead of him.

Even I, who am usually quick-witted, am speechless this time, for I recognize that herd as the one rancher Cartwight had rustled from him a week ago. I am about to slap Bertie on the back when I see how ashamed he looks.

"Frightfully shameful of me," he says. "But these are all I could find on such short notice, don't you know. I'm afraid I shall make a dreadfully poor assistant, Mr. Ferguson. I broke a law, you know. Two chaps were driving these beasts, and I had to engage them in fisticuffs before I could bring what you wanted."

I am numb in the noggin, I am so surprised. I am trying to tell Bertie that he rescued the stolen herd the sheriff is even now looking for, but I can't get a word out.

Bertie looks like he is about to cry. "I suppose I am a bloomin' failure, Mr. Ferguson. I tried, of course, really I did. But I could only bring twenty-seven small bulls, and you ordered me to get forty-five."

I know right then that I will never drink another drop.

"If you'll give me another chance, I shall try to do better," Bertie is promising humbly. "The newness of your land, you know—and you cow persons and your ways are really amazing. Extrawdinary! Why—don't you know, when you ordered me to get bullets for you, at first I imagined you meant cartridges, instead of these young bulls. Frightfully stupid of me, eh what?"

THE END

★ IT'S A CALAMITY ★

Fact Feature by Wayne D. Mote

A young but rugged girl by the name of Jane Burkes was a scout with the U. S. Army during the early 1860's. While out with a scouting party in the Black Hills one day they were ambushed by a band of hostile Sioux Indians.

A red-skinned sniper shot one of the officers, knocking him from his saddle. The fallen officer was about to be scalped by two other braves when the girl came to his rescue. She spurred her horse forward at a gallop, clinging Indian fashion to the animal's side for protection from bullets. Then she shot the Indians dead as they were on the verge of lifting the officer's hair.

While still in her saddle, and her horse at a gallop, she reached down and lifted the man from the ground and pulled him aboard her own mount and escaped back to the main body of troops.

The officer, upon learinng that he had been saved by the husky young girl, said, "a man is unusually lucky to have such heroines around in times of calamity."

The girl became known as "Calamity Jane" and carried the name until the end of her days.

Mary had become one of the lobo bunch.

KILL FAST, RIDE HARD!

by Art Kercheval

"I'm doing this town a favor by gunning down Mitch Meldrum, and it'll be another favor when I settle with Grabow. So just keep out of my way, Lawdog. Your hands are tied, but mine aren't."

RALPH LONGAN snapped out his Smith and Wesson six-gun, this being trail's end. He got it out a little faster than Mitch Meldrum, and that's why he still lived. Mitch became an immediate duty for the town undertaker, as grim-faced Ralph re-holstered.

Townspeople swarmed into view,

but kept their distance in a cautious circle. The fat man wearing the sheriff's star and an air of fearful uncertainty wobbled up; he took one look at the corpse, then lifted his eyes to take in Ralph's leanness and tallness. "Deader'n hell," he said needlessly. "Maybe you oughta explain yourself, Mister."

"A lot of folks saw it," Ralph said with a growing tightness; "they must've seen Meldrum draw first."

"So you knew him."

"Of course, star-packer." Impatience was in Ralph; impatience, because his work was only half done in this town of Monarch. "It goes way back. You wouldn't be interested; if you got no objections now, I'll be on my way."

"Out of town, maybe?" The sheriff scrubbed his chin and a spark of hope gained a place in his eyes.

"Too much to ask for, sheriff," Ralph said then. "And don't get notions of blocking any of my trails. You might be a nice gent, after all, and I'd hate to shoot you."

The big lawman, he saw, lacked courage. That meant he wasn't really the law at all—just toting the badge, simply because somebody had to tote it. Ralph smirked. He had a pretty good idea who was running things around Monarch. Meldrum, lying here in street dust, had been the lesser of his two important goals; Ralph Longan aimed to get at Nate Grabow.

He went to the hitch-rack and got into saddle, then twisted around at a sudden thought. "Meldrum being what he was, I don't reckon he had many friends, sheriff. Matter of fact, I got a hunch I've done the folks of Monarch, including you, a right smart of a favor."

The fat sheriff looked worried, his brow in lifted wrinkles. "Most of the cattlemen around this Saber range, stranger, might admire to shake your hand," he said hesitantly. "They're up in arms over this wholesale rustling, which points a finger and no mistake at Grabow and Meldrum. I've heard talk I can't stop that they've aimed to 'get' them two wide-loopers some dark night."

"Big fireworks in the offing, huh?" Ralph leaned and stroked his horse's mane, murmuring something to stop its fidgeting.

"Right off," the lawman cautioned, "you got two enemies. Nate Grabow will be gunning for you, soon's he gits wind of this shooting match. And Mary Meldrum's plumb apt to strap on her lead chucker and come humping after you."

"Mary! Mary..." The name ripped apprehensively from his lips; the name Mary, whomever it might belong to, always did things to him! "Her last name wouldn't use to be O'Keefe?"

"Wouldn't know about that; but she's the widow of the long-geared son you just beat to the shoot. Kind of a medium-tall girl, if you're interested. Kind of haunting hazel eyes, nut-brown hair, and complected like a Grand Valley peach. A looker, stranger. Why—do you know—"

Ralph was already riding. He was sure his face had been dead-white and something of a giveaway of his feelings. Now that his first kill was behind him, reaction was setting in. Thought of blood spilled was strangely sickening him. Squeamish suddenly, after five years of building up to this thing! He hadn't supposed it would be like this at all. This remorse and this let-down of his hate!

With an effort, then, he hurled asunder these black thoughts for others. Mary O'Keefe! Now Mary Meldrum. It could be! The pieces of a scattered puzzle seemed to fit. But he was shockingly unprepared for finding her at the end of his long gun trail...

FOR A MISERABLE, ravaging hour, he rode aimlessly. During that hour, the back-trail to Texas beckoned many times. Maybe it was the only way out of this present mess. Or, did he want to find a way out? The memory of Mary O'Keefe disturbed him; and it dovetailed exactly with the sheriff's description of her. Somehow, he was sure of it

now, sure Mary, somewhere along the line, had married Mitch Meldrum. But, with this startling realization, he wasn't too sure of himself. Mary, for these past five years, had been conniving with outlaws—the same rotten pair he had sworn to kill. Maybe that slammed her into the same hogpen with them.

He neck-reined Capitan, his white-stockinged roan, abruptly, an oath rumbling out of him. It wasn't his way to run from things. Besides, an overwhelming, and unaccountable, yen was in him to see once more a pair of hazel eyes and nut-brown hair and a peach complexion. "How'll I find the Meldrums?" He asked this of a cowboy on the trail, sure that the fellow wouldn't have heard yet about the killing in Monarch.

He saw her, then, in the Meldrum backyard, hanging out wash. She whirled, startled, a pair of clothespins dropping from her mouth.

"Ralph Longan!"

He nodded, shifting in saddle. "Yeah, the same old Longan, Mary. 'Cept what five years of hate can do to change a man."

She caught her breath, backing a step. "Then you're here to—to kill them? Nate and—and Mitch?"

"I won't chase the dog around the stump, Mrs. Meldrum." His eyes burned a little. "Nate's the only one left."

She swayed, then mustered control of herself, her eyes weighty with new wisdom. But dry, too; Mary Meldrum wasn't crying. Five years, it seemed, had changed her considerably. This was the breath-robbing allness of everything he had imagined she would become—a woman deep and real and beautiful. Or was she? He was forgetting she had married an outlaw.

"I knew it would happen some day," she said. "Ralph, I knew you'd find him; it—it had to be."

Ralph wondered about her, suddenly. Certainly Mary wasn't grieving a particle over her dead husband. Rather, she appeared to be glad that it was over! Unconsciously, it

seemed, she hung up the last of her wash, a pair of Levis that Meldrum would no longer wear. Then she faced Ralph, with something of desperation in her eyes. "Water and grain your horse, Ralph, and come into the house. It's almost noon. Nate's away on a business trip in the Sabers and isn't expected back to his ranch until late this afternoon. He won't know about what's happened until then. So it'll be safe, Ralph."

"Safe? I'm not trying to avoid the big polecat; you know that."

They went into the house, presently, he taking her clothesbasket. "Not too much to scare up, but I'll fix you something," she said. She put away her laundry soap and tubs, went into the dugout cooler and came back with a briskness, with cold roast and other things.

"You got it hard here," Ralph observed.

She brushed back a strand of hair, glanced up at him, nodding. "I asked for it, I guess," she said wryly. "I can see it in your eyes—I've been wicked. But you don't know how I've cried myself to sleep many times, when Mitch wasn't around to hear me, hoping someday you'd come."

"Isn't it a little late for that, Mary?"

She nodded again, with understanding, now bent to cut the meat. "I have no real excuses, Ralph." The words came slow and thoughtful and seemed full of pain. "Unless—unless it is in you to have a little forgiveness. Try to realize, Ralph Longan, that I was only eighteen at the time. Wild and impulsive and craving excitement, fun. You didn't offer that, I couldn't see myself waiting until I was properly 'old' enough to marry a serious-minded and scrimping small

rancher. Oh, if I'd only had just a little sense."

"We can't make over our lives, Mary. We have to go on from here."

"I couldn't blame you for despising me," she continued. She looked at him with a searching sweep of hazel eyes. "I was selfish and mean and small that night. I told you I was running away, from you, my family, from all the imagined stuffiness of my tight little world. But I didn't tell you everything; I didn't tell you I was going to meet Mitch Meldrum. Oh, we were married right away. But you can't picture the hell I went through from then on."

HE ATE of her food, shamelessly, because he was ravenously hungry. Not until he was through did he express a thought that had been vivid in him for five hate-warped years: "I'm remembering, Mary, what happened to Harve."

Suddenly he didn't want her to suffer anymore, this distraught girl whom he once might have married, if she could have seen him differently. Mary, whom he'd never been able to get out of his mind. No matter what she'd done, what she would do, the bright, whisper-close and utterly maddening image of Mitch Meldrum's widow was a permanent brand upon his soul. But there was another image there, too. He had killed one man because of it. Another man was due to die, whether spilled blood bothered Ralph Longan or not. Somehow—there was no getting away from it—this girl shared in the same guilt.

"You didn't see that thing happen," Mary was saying, seemingly out of the emptiness of her shattered existence. "Thank Gawd for that. I was there, Ralph; I saw it all."

Ralph was pacing up and down. She was coming toward him, clutching at his arms. "Mitch didn't do it; give him credit for that. Not that I'm trying to paint him white. I can never do that. Mitch was rotten, clear through. The day Harve was killed, I learned to hate both of them. But Mitch was good and decent, alongside Nate Grabow. Nate murdered these five years, there's just one thing I've coveted of Nate Grabow's, his magnificent white horse. If anything happens to Nate, I'm cold-blooded enough to want that horse."

The memory of Harve, even yet, caused a stab of pain in Ralph Longan. Mary could never understand, not fully; no one would ever understand. A man's emotions sometimes went into dark depths beyond any human calculation. Harve and he had always been close. Ralph and his kid brother had never been separated, until that crimson day of his death.

Ralph built a cigarette, nervously, licking the paper. Events ran through his mind, and faces were sharply etched. Harve had just passed his twelfth birthday, only a day or so before tragedy struck. Together, they had known a hard-riding, high-whooping companionship. The entrance of Mary into that picture would have made it perfect. But Mary, by that time, had long since disappeared from this corner of West Texas, her whereabouts a mystery to Ralph, her anxious family, and their neighbors.

Then came the advent of Nate Grabow and Mitch Meldrum into West Texas. Ralph smoked thoughtfully. Grabow and Meldrum, with their killing guns. Saddlebags crammed with loot from a bank job in nearby Chisum town, their posse-prodded flight had brought them pounding across Ralph's Long M spread. That was when little Harve had been carried off as hostage.

"Nate and Mitch hadn't made themselves known in the country yet, when I first met Mitch," Mary's words were drumming needlessly into him now. "When they brought the boy into camp, I broke for the first time, threatened to tell. Mitch's big fist slammed me into a corner. Later, when Harve was no longer useful to them, I watched Nate empty his whole six-gun into the kid. It was a sight I hope I never see again. It made me sick for two days. Oh, you'll probably say I could have run away. I tried, Ralph, I tried; I can show you a dozen scars I got for my

your brother, over Mitch's protests."

She paused and gave a shudder. "You don't know Nate. Nate—Nate may have a crazy hope, now that Mitch's gone, that he can have me. Once or twice Mitch actually resented him—the way Nate a few times looked at me. That was why we didn't live in Nate's big house." She added, musingly then, "In all efforts. Since then, I've never tried again—"

RALPH KNEW a restlessness as he crushed his cigarette stub against his emptied plate. He stood there beside the table, thinking about the cruel-featured, heavy-bodied Grabow and wondering how soon he would have the necessary opportunity of killing him. He was conscious of sweat in the lines of his tensed right palm, crooking as it would for a sudden draw. He had been this way, just before facing Meldrum earlier today. He had not been so eager, immediately afterward. Maybe before the day ran out death would lick out redly once again from a bucking Smith and Wesson.

No! Profound realization came to Ralph that he couldn't. It crushed into him that his love for Mary, sweeping through him with a sweet, unreasonable fire, was smashing to

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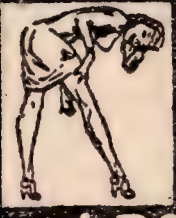

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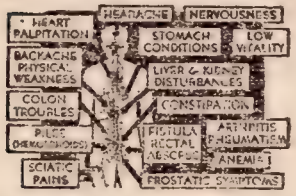

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smithereens all other considerations. It lifted him above this beforehand passion to kill. He would let Nate Grabow live.

"We're going away," he said suddenly, aware of her hazel eyes sharp and questing into him like the knives of his own conscience. "You and I. Long-shot gamblers, that's us, with our last chip bet on the future. We'll get married, soon as we're out of the Sabers."

She came toward him, blinking. "Do you know what you're saying, Ralph?"

"Yes, I know what I'm saying." The words came well-chosen. "I'm giving up my hunt for Nate Grabow. I'm doing something for you and me. Yes, we'll go away, Mary. Far away. Where I can't touch Grabow, and Grabow can't touch me. Where we can forget, Mary."

She seemed to be taken aback. "You're forgetting—Harve?"

"I know that, too well," he went on, words tumbling out. "Maybe it isn't right, but we're doing it."

Once more she was before him, her small hands seizing his, and she looked up at him. Were her eyes glistening just a little? "Ralph, Ralph, don't say it again. My—my heart tells me to be glad, but I can't be. Because of you. Because we wouldn't be happy with you always remembering what you had left undone here in the Saber country. Go after him first, Ralph. K-kill him. Then we'll leave...together."

He stood unmoved, in his purposeful rigidity.

"I love you, too," she told him steadily. "I think you know that, now. No, I'm not deserving. I realize that. Soon after I married Mitch, I came to really know myself. I knew then I didn't love him and never would. I would have given half my life to have gone back to you. Ralph, believe me, that is the truth."

"I know, but—"

"Don't you suppose I have suffered?" she went on, patiently. "I came from a decent home, and how I long to go back into one. Lean years? Of course we'll have them. I've known them all my life. Oh,

Ralph, don't spoil it all by forcing us to ride off too soon. Your gun is fast. You will be the one to live."

He shook his head. "No, let somebody else square the account with him, Mary. Four years ago, according to the trail gossip I managed to pick up, he came into this country, and he's already a big man. So big, in fact, he's got your local law-dog, Hart Fleming, practically eating out of his hands and liking it. So, he has his enemies, many of them. Grabow became large up here because his loop is quite sticky. Other men's cattle eventually bought him the big Triangle Q spread, and other men's cattle being shoved over his own pass through the Sabers made him filthy rich. Don't you see, he'll have his hour of reckoning?"

"All right then," she nodded. "Saddle the horses, Ralph."

She put on her mackinaw and hat, buckled on her .38. Minutes later, they were riding. The sun was just nooning as they pointed toward the foothills.

As they rode, Ralph knew he was abruptly uprooting two lives, for whatever lay beyond those blurred

horizons of the russet Saber Mountains. No more, he realized, had he damning doubts about this girl.

She told him, then, of the shortcut they were taking. Grabow, he allowed from his meager knowledge of the

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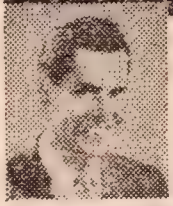

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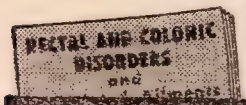

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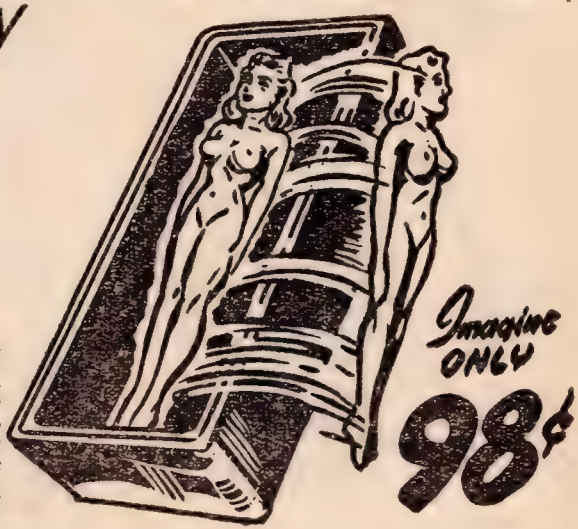

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country, might be a threat to their flight, as long as they remained on this side of the range. But with speed, and a little luck, they could be beyond the Sabers by tomorrow afternoon.

They penetrated the fastnesses of these sandstone and juniper-sprinkled heights, Mary taking the lead. She didn't pick the rocky going, striking as straight a course as possible over the shaley slants. Slowly, unaccountably, as they climbed, Ralph began to wonder if he wasn't making a mistake in being this hasty. Mary might be right. He was giving up the careful planning of five years. Was it shooting square with a memory?

Long ago, Grabow had ticketed himself to die. He'd cut Harve Longan down with his murderous gun. Not satisfied with one shot, he'd emptied that weapon into Ralph's already crumpling kid brother.

TWO HOURS passed. They stopped at a creek to blow and water their horses. Ralph and Mary got down, flattened themselves and drank deep. He was aware that she looked at him, queerly, for he had maintained an unnatural silence too long.

Nevertheless, a moment later, he kept on nudging Capitan, in the way they had been going, Mary, the silent one now, following suit. "We set our course, Mary," he murmured doggedly, slapping a finality on his decision. "We won't turn from it. We're—long-shot gamblers."

They rode recklessly onward, both tight-lipped, with Capitan's every forward step an agony of wrong-

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doing inside Ralph Longan... Before another hour went, they came to crosstrails. Mary swerved her horse, beckoning him to the left.

"Part of the shortcut," she told him, taut; "we'll avoid Nate, this way."

Ralph nodded, slowing the pace in here to match hers, for this was rougher and rockier. At least, he reflected, it would hide tracks. Now and then he threw a glance at the girl, and thought her acting strange. He looked up at the sun. Late afternoon. He told himself Grabow, by whatever trail he took, wouldn't have had time to ride down to his ranch and back.

The first flashing knowledge he had of trickery was when they rounded the bend suddenly and there he was. Nate Grabow, on his white horse! Nate Grabow. Ralph was sure of it. "You little snake!" he breathed it out at Mary, at the same time that he made his stab for iron. Grabow, with a curse, was already leaping his gun from holster. But the abruptness of the stockily built rider being before them had startled Capitan into a bucking side-jump, and it threw Ralph's bullet wild. Grabow's gun was booming. The heavy blast slammed Ralph out of saddle, gun going one way, he another.

He was bad hit, he realized, in his left shoulder. Desperately he clung to a dimming consciousness, agony filming a sweat over his body. He hadn't moved, yet. It was a long crawl over rock rubble to where he must have dropped his gun. The pain shot deeper in him. He couldn't see for the haze it had draped over him. Grabow surely would get him with his next try. But why wasn't he shooting? It dawned on Ralph quickly. Maybe Grabow thought he was dead. Ever so slowly, Ralph crawled...

"So you killed him!" It was Mary's voice, screaming with rage and wild frustration, and it halted him and suddenly cleared his torture-dazed senses, revealing to him she had scooped up his own .45. "So you killed the dumb-skulled cow-nurse, Nate! That wasn't the way I wanted

it to happen. I slaved away too many years for Mitch waiting for just the right chance to get what I was after without becoming involved. But I'll make it come out my way now, and I won't be involved, either!"

Ralph saw it, then, saw Mary pump the .45 slug into the surprised rider. A soft oath of satisfaction was bursting from her lips. Grabow gave out a groan and slid lifelessly from leather.

"Now I will still get that money you've hidden on your great big ranch, Nate," Mary was saying, as if Grabow could hear. "A fortune you've made off of rustling. Ralph Longan doesn't count; he never did, the poor sucker! If he'd lived, and obliged me by shooting you, I'd have given him nothing but the horse laugh. But I'm glad he's dead. You two met just like I'd planned it. I knew you'd be coming down this trail. All I had to do was cause Longan to go up it. The law'll take one look and say you two shot each other."

She was dismounting, coming toward the sprawled figure. "Remember, Nate," she breathed, "—remember that day I grabbed your gun and put the last shot into that snot-nosed brat of a Harve Longan myself? I made sure he was dead, didn't I? Just as I'm making sure of you now ..." She was shooting, again, into the still shape, laughing. "Now, I'm riding back to your ranch after that money, Nate. Ten feet deep under the grain bin, isn't that right? Mitch let that fact slip once. I'm riding back, Nate," she smiled satanically, "on a white horse I knew I'd own someday."

[*Turn Page*]

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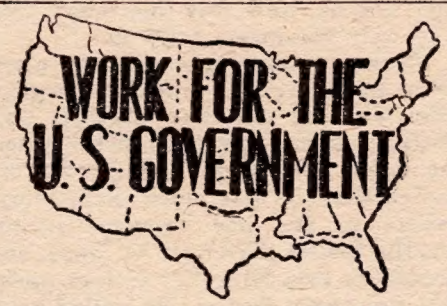

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What, Ralph wondered then, would he do with a gun in his hand, if Grabow were still alive to take his bullet? Who would he shoot? But he didn't try to answer these questions, because abruptly the black shroud of unconsciousness dropped mercifully over him.

HE'D ALWAYS love her, no matter what another circumstance sometime might force him to do. This was his first waking, damning thought. That would never change, he vowed. No more than he could change this unyielding reality before him that he could never have her.

Ralph wasn't destined to die. Somehow he was aware of this as he managed to drag himself laboriously and painfully into saddle. Kneeing Capitan downslope, his head lolling somewhat against his chest, he thought there must be a doctor in a town the size of Monarch. Once patched up, he'd quit this range, taking only memories from it.

Darkness came down finally upon him, and there was a moon that gave him a sense of time passing, and Ralph was halfway to Monarch when he heard the shot. Vaguely he recalled that *she* was down there somewhere in the low country, racing madly toward Triangle Q. Soon she would be satisfying her vicious quest for some easy money. He pulled up a little, hearing shouts down below. Advancing slowly for the next twenty minutes, he presently was able to make out the cluster of riders ahead, halted around something.

"Gawd, we thought it was him, Hart," a man's voice sounded hollow-toned. "Gawd! Ridin' that white hoss and all."

Ralph dug deep with the spurs, fully roused now, plunging recklessly down the gravelly slant. Oblivious of the footing, he flung himself from saddle. Mary! Even as he drove himself stumblingly forward, he knew that the huddled shape of Mary Meldrum was now a thing of death.

With the old, old ache he dropped down beside her, emotion racketing in him. Lies, lies! Everything she'd told him had been lies. Lies that didn't matter anymore. It did matter about Harve, of course. But he was all mixed up about that. She had been Mary, what did anything else count just now? Ralph went suddenly old and dry and ugly inside with his loneliness. It was some minutes before he rose, the black world swirling before him.

"Mister, it was a terrible mistake." It was Sheriff Hart Fleming speaking, waddling before him, pulling nervously at his chin. "It was dark, and we reco'nized the hoss, jumped to conclusions. You see, stranger, most of these men are cattle ranchers hereabouts. They've had their herds whittled down almost to a frazzle, and little by little they been gathering evidence against Grabow and Meldrum. Tonight, they banded together, aimed to settle with Grabow, once and for all." He looked up at Ralph, almost fearfully, it seemed. "I come along, finally agreeing to give this vigilante sort of business the sanction of the law. Looks like we played hell, right off. But—she—she—"

Ralph, sick with complete understanding, managed a nod. "I know. She was of the same stripe. But she's dead, she's dead..." He bit his lower lip, with a hard and piercing clamp of teeth.

Somebody noticed for the first time, then, that he was wounded, for the same somebody hollered for a doctor, who happened to be in the crowd. He didn't tell them about Grabow being dead, after the medico had patched him up. They'd find that out for themselves. Astride Capitan, beating sunup by a couple of hours, he took the trail south. Not toward Texas, maybe Arizona. It would take a long time to get the bitter gall of his immediate present out of his system, because memories never quite give up. Somewhere ahead, however, he'd find new interests to lessen the importance of the old ones. Someone would flash forth in his life someday, to brightly brush aside this vision of cheating hazel eyes.

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